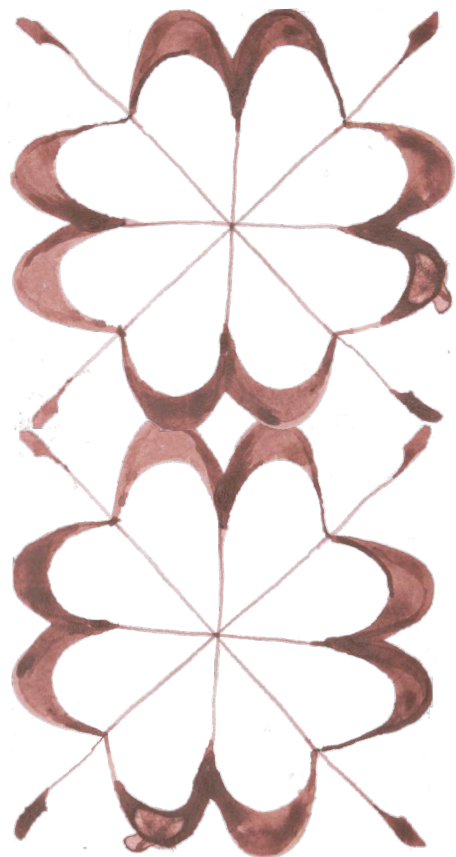


# designed

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2024  
2025  
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# dēsigned

*New England's first publication  
for the South Asian diaspora*

*desi-gned*      2025      Issue 3

Providence, RI 02903-02912  
United States of America



*desi* is derived from the Sanskrit word “*deśā*,” meaning, ‘land or country’ and hence, *desi* means ‘of the homeland.’

*desi* is a self-appellation—an ethnonym used by people of the Indian subcontinent and its diaspora to describe their cultures, identities, and shared histories.

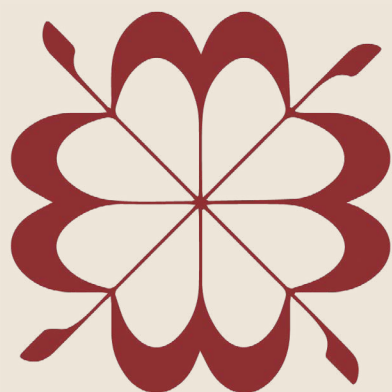
*desi* is widely used across South Asia, comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

# dēsi

*desi* transcends single nationalities, languages, or religions. It evokes a deep connection to the motherland—rooted in age-old traditions shaped by centuries of migration, cohabitation, and innovation. In attempting to retell this diverse, largely oral and local history, much has been distorted and homogenized, forgotten and lost. If South Asia is an anthology of human tales, then a majority of its tales have been unwritten.

As creatives navigating the complexities of being South Asian, we face a crisis of authenticity—one that calls for humility and a plurality of voices to confront the fractures of our globalized present. In bringing our stories into spaces marked by erasure, appropriation, and asymmetries of power, we center native terminology to reclaim silenced histories, revive print archives as vessels of human memory, and subvert academic norms to create more equitable ways of knowing.

*desi-gned* is our compilation of living archives—of ingenious craftsmanship, subaltern histories, and current contemplations—of untold *desi* stories that need to be shared.



The pattern is a marriage of the traditions of *kolam* (floor murals made using rice powder) from the South and *jali* (Arabic-inspired stone curtains that are carved into arches and windows) from the North—the two most dominant aesthetic cultures from South Asia that comprise a multitude of sub-cultures and identities.



To be from the diaspora is to live in constant negotiation of self—an identity shaped by forces both foreign and familiar. The cover visualizes this ongoing tension: the act of holding on while learning to let go.

Two women, mirrored yet apart, embody a split self. One, in a golden mask with natural hair, stands rooted in ancestral memory. The other, in a silver mask and blonde wig, reflects the violence of assimilation. The golden offering—warm and ceremonial—carries the weight of reverence. Its silver counterpart—softer and more pliable—suggests transformation. Above them, woodpeckers echo the non-linear work of identity—probing, adapting, returning. They trace storied paths through a raging storm, mapping rupture and continuity.

Paree Rohera, a painter from Mumbai, interprets the *desi-gned* mission and motif, visualizing our purpose in her style.

*Rohera is currently pursuing a BFA in Painting at Rhode Island School of Design. Her practice finds beauty in the negative. Through surrealism, maximalism, and ornamentation, she examines colonial insecurities, shared fears, and inherited beauty standards in South Asian communities.*



This publication was created within the colonial structures of *Brown University* and *Rhode Island School of Design*—institutions that are located on the ancestral and contemporary homelands of the *Narragansett*, *Wampanoag*, and *Nipmuc* Nations. In studying and thinking about art and culture in English and within a dominant Western European academic tradition, we legitimize a global colonial power structure. These institutions and industries are responsible for many injustices, both past and ongoing, that include slavery and race prejudice.

We are committed to work together to honor this past and build a future that champions greater acknowledgment, accessibility, and inclusivity towards peoples and perspectives from all cultures, backgrounds, and traditions.

*desi-gned* has been supported by the RISD Research *SPUR Fund Grant*. Our co-sponsors include:



Editors-in-Chief

*Hrishita Acharya*  
RISD 2026  
Industrial Design

*Harsh Thakkar*  
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Design Director

*Sejal Gupta*  
RISD 2025  
Graphic Design

Founding Editor

*Yukti V. Agarwal*  
Brown | RISD 2024.5

Founding Designer

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Brown | RISD 2024

Designers

*Chahak Surana*  
RISD 2026  
Graphic Design

*Jyot Kaur Thind*  
RISD 2025  
Graphic Design

Editor

*Siya Girdhar*  
RISD 2026  
Interior Architecture

*Further contributions by*  
*Chahek Bansal (RISD 2027)*  
*Avanee Dalmia (Brown 2026)*  
*Tanvi Mittal (RISD 2027)*

Special thanks to Jennifer Liese and Douglass Scott for the innumerable hours of their time advising us on design and publishing.

# Editors’ Note

For many of us with diasporic identities, leaving home often means packing two kinds of luggage. One that holds all the things we need—clothes, chargers, a toothbrush—and one that holds all the food. Be it ready-to-eat meals, *achaars*, dried fruits, or Maggi, we dedicate space to a fragment of what’s left behind. This issue of *desi-gned* was born of the urge to carry the taste of home—of what we savor, remember, and love.

To open the trunk, pull out an idea and look closely—stretch it, chop it up, grind it down, flip it in the air, let it rise, garnish it—and, most importantly, share it.

Now in its third issue, *desi-gned* remains a collection of latent stories that ask to be spoken aloud. This edition, rather than resurrecting the past or drafting a lexicon for the present, posits a conveyance between the two—infusing tradition, knowledge, and identity into a new age and place. Our theme, in fact, is *carrying*: carrying matter, carrying method, and carrying memory. What is a carrier? A person or thing that facilitates movement between two entities. Are we carrying forward a legacy? Are we pigeons carrying notes? How do we define the things we carry? How do they define us? How do things change by way of being carried? Where is the line between all that we carry and all that is worth carrying?

Our contributors explore these questions from all angles. As you flip through the issue, you’ll move from the tangible to the intangible, from matter to memory. Whether it’s the dwindling commotion of Bombay’s *Chor Bazaar* or the treasured portability of ritualistic objects; a Maldivian folk recipe of the good and the evil spirits or the unknown origins of commonly used food ingredients; the ungovernability of the Jri Bamon tree or the noise of memory—our cohort of writers brings you along on a physical and metaphysical journey.

This issue invites you to tug at the tension between holding on and letting go. As you step in, may these pages offer a pause, a thread of wonder, or a question to return to.

May you find something worth carrying with you,



Hrishita Acharya



Harsh Thakkar

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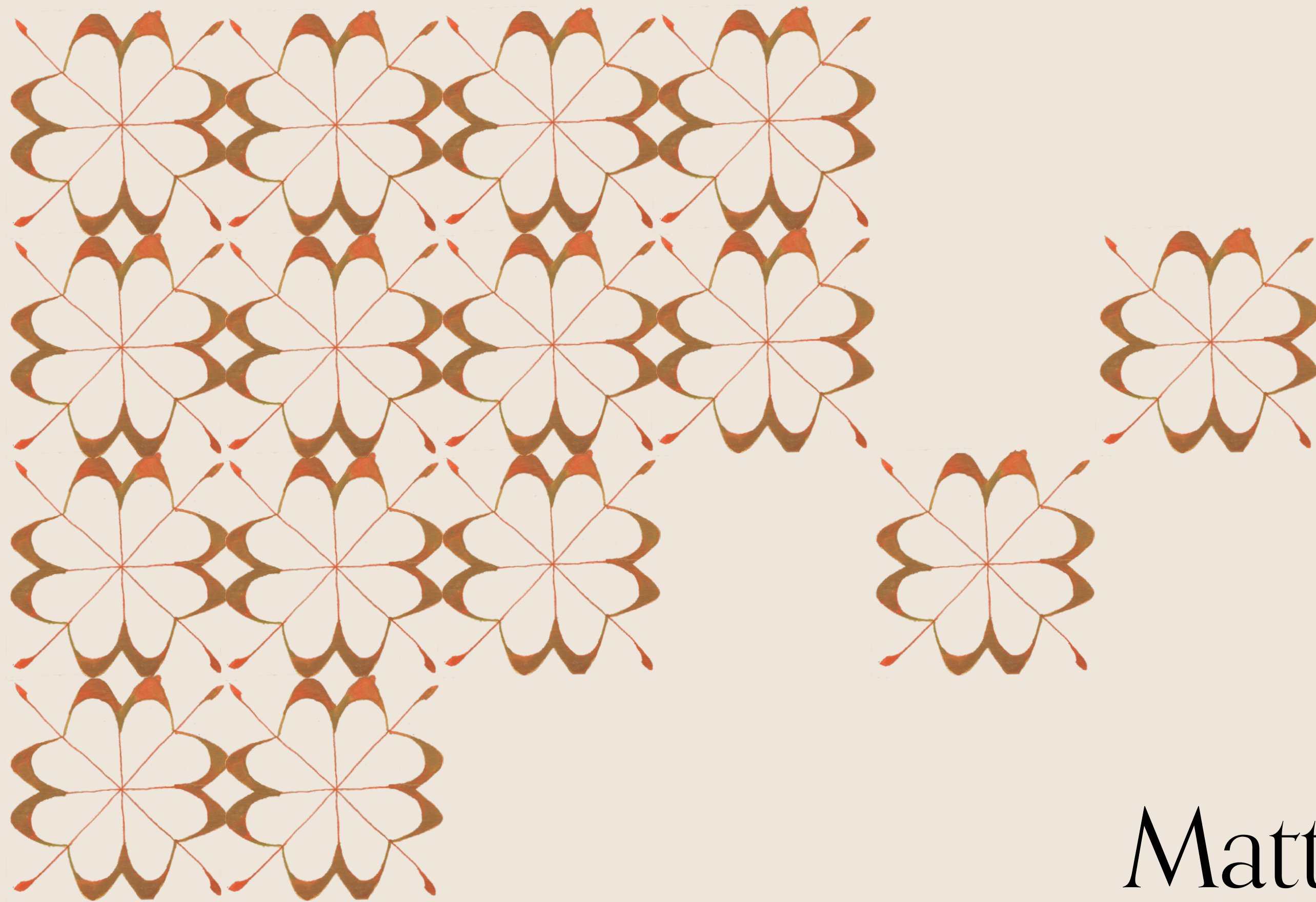
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Matter



# Vishwaas

Designing Faith for a Constantly Moving Life

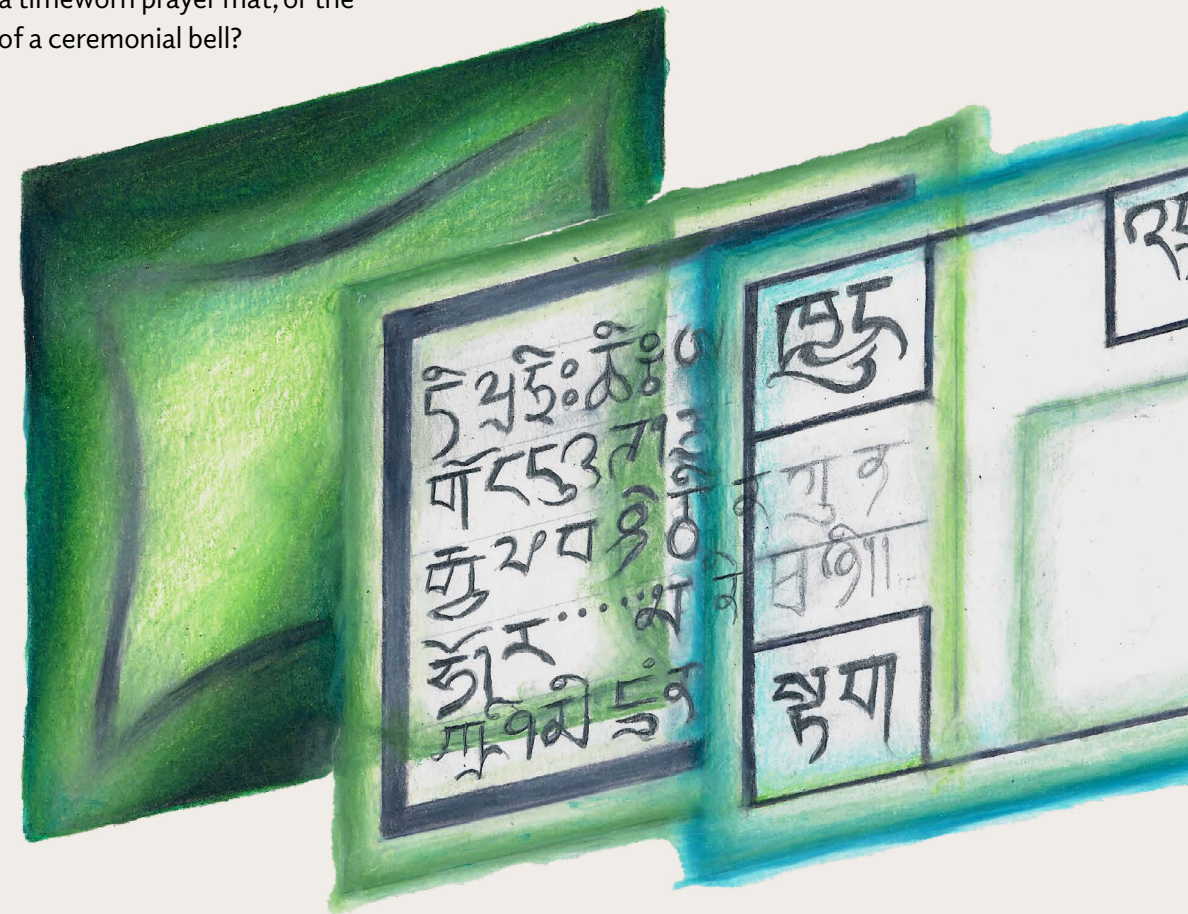
Written and Illustrated by Adhvik Aggarwal  
Designed by Chahak Surana



An interpretive rendition of the Islamic Tree of Life.

Vishwaas, the Hindi word for ‘belief’, is the catalyst that drives creation. Throughout human history, belief has been the unseen force behind the emblems of our culture, shaping our world with intention and devotion. Design is often thought of as purely functional, but some of the most enduring designs come from belief systems. Objects tied to faith represent the way good design naturally balances purpose, meaning, and use.

Take a moment to imagine—what does belief look like in terms of design? Is it the flutter of prayer flags in the Himalayan winds, the soft grooves of a timeworn prayer mat, or the metallic chime of a ceremonial bell?



An exploded view of the Lung ta's details, which includes prayers and mantras written in Tibetan.

Creations like these are made for mobility, carrying spirituality beyond static rituals, making it accessible and adaptable in an ever-changing world.

These objects are more than just functional tools; they are timeless lessons for modern designers. Through their simplicity and strong cultural ties, they exemplify what makes design truly enduring.



## Lung Ta

The Lung ta prayer flags aren't just fabric fluttering in the wind—they're small bursts of joy and blessings that adorn the sky. Lung ta, meaning 'wind horse', embodies the idea of carrying prayers across the world, riding the wind like a messenger of hope. The beauty of the flags goes beyond their fluttering charm and ripples through the peaks of the Himalayas.

Introduced to Buddhism in Tibet during the 7th century CE, prayer flags incorporate older sacred texts, mantras, and symbols to disseminate messages of compassion and wisdom. They are hung diagonally from lower elevations to higher objects—from rocks to poles—and adorn temples, stupas, and mountain passes. They are always hung in sets of five.

*The 5 colors of the flags and the elements they are based on.*



**Yellow:** Relating to the earth, yellow stands for stability, fertility, and a sense of grounding.

**Blue:** Standing for the sky and space, blue symbolizes vastness, open-mindedness, and infinite flow.

**White:** Symbolizing air and wind, white flags evoke purity, compassion, and the breath of life.

**Red:** Representing fire, red signifies energy, passion, and transformation.

**Green:** Denoting water, green flags symbolize harmony, balance, and nurturing care.

Over time, the prints fade, symbolizing life's impermanence and the renewal of spiritual energy. Credits to their simplicity, anyone can hang them. As old flags deteriorate, new ones replace them, continuing the cycle of blessings. These faded messages are thus released, signifying an embrace of change and a reminder that impermanence can be beautiful.

Crafted from biodegradable materials like cotton and natural dyes, Lung Ta flags live in harmony with their environment. For everyone across the vast Himalayan mountains, they offer assurance, carried across vast landscapes by the wind.



## Ghanti

The ghanti (ritual bell) embodies the timeless echo of worship, transforming sound into an unmistakable connection with the divine. Its concave exterior cradles the *ghungru* (clapper) within, creating a harmony that ripples outward when struck. The rounded form amplifies and sustains this resonance. One can hear it and feel its rich, resounding presence without needing to know its history or meaning.

One who holds a ghanti holds a world in their hand. Its intricate carvings—depicting deities and sacred patterns—are not mere adornments, but narratives of faith and craftsmanship. It is usually forged from sacred metals like gold, silver, and copper, which are chosen and used for their celestial ties.



The bell's sound vibrates with Om, the primordial hum of the universe, which cuts through noise and instantly creates a space of focus and calm. A simple swing of the hand can turn any place into a space of reflection, be it for ritual or for grounding. The auditory impact of the ghanti makes it easy to connect with. It creates a sensory appeal that can engage a young child to play with it as much as it can an older priest in a temple. The ghanti shows that great design is self-evident—it doesn't need an explanation, it is simply welcomed.



## Janamaz

The Janamaz turns any space into a place of comfort. This small, sacred rug, used by Muslims during *sajdah* (prostration), provides a clean, sanctified surface for prayer, creating an intimate space for worship anywhere. Typically around 26 x 48 inches—comparable to a folded yoga mat—its compact size and durable fabrics, typically cotton or wool, make it ideal for frequent travel and daily use.

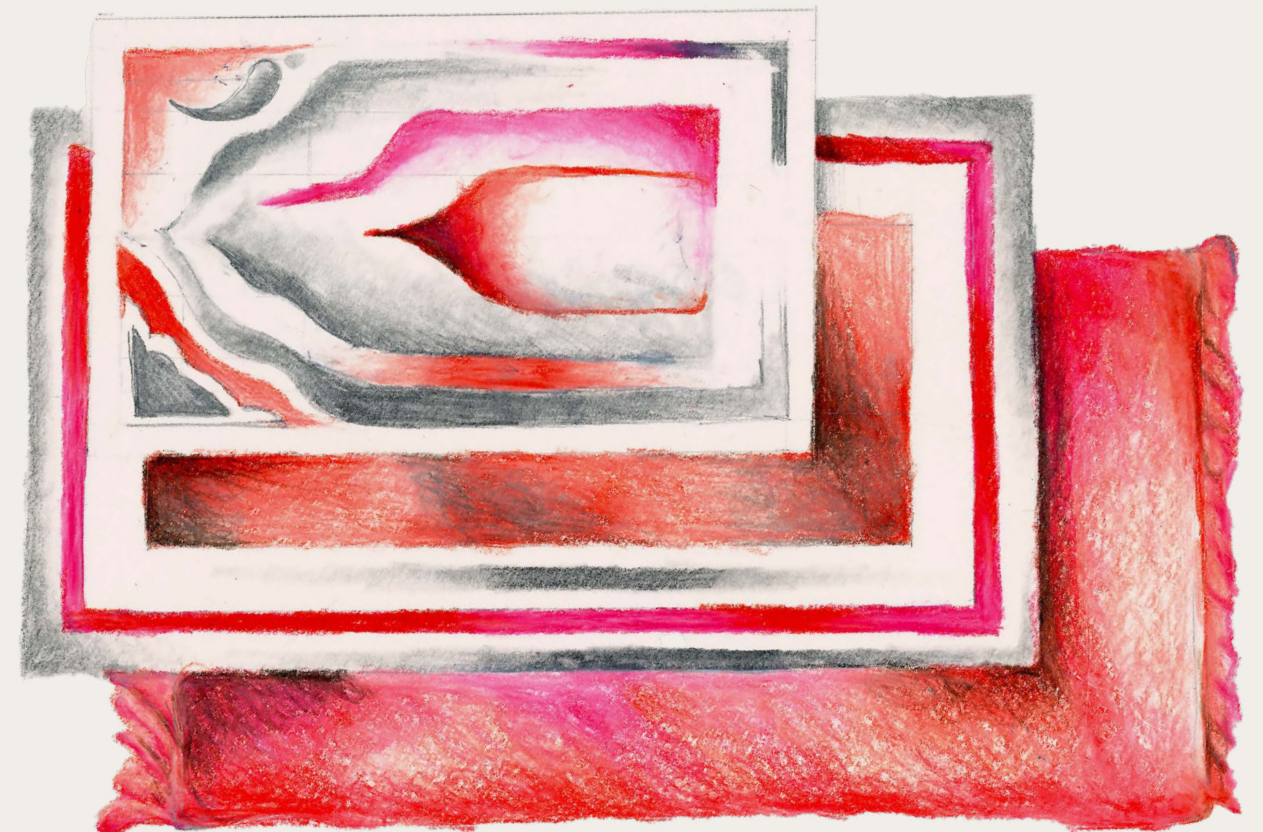
A small rug may seem simple, but unrolling it creates a personal sanctuary no matter where one is. An empty airport lounge, a hotel room, or a quiet corner of a home, it lays down a sense of peace and belonging.

It features vibrant patterns created with natural dyes from plants and minerals, which carry cultural and symbolic meanings. At its heart is the *mihrab*, a niche-like motif, that guides worshippers toward the *qibla*, the direction of Mecca.

This symbol often represents the doorway to paradise or the Garden of Eden. These motifs are interwoven with birds, flowers, and abstract shapes. By blending these patterns, the Janamaz carries a genealogy of belief systems and artistic practice, linking the spiritual with the cultural in its very threads.

Good design isn't just about how something looks—it's about how it makes you feel. The Janamaz is proof that objects can hold more than function. They carry reassurance, routine, and a quiet kind of strength. In a world that's always moving, it gives people the chance to pause and find a moment of stillness anywhere.

*An exploded view of the janamaz's details and the mihrab.*



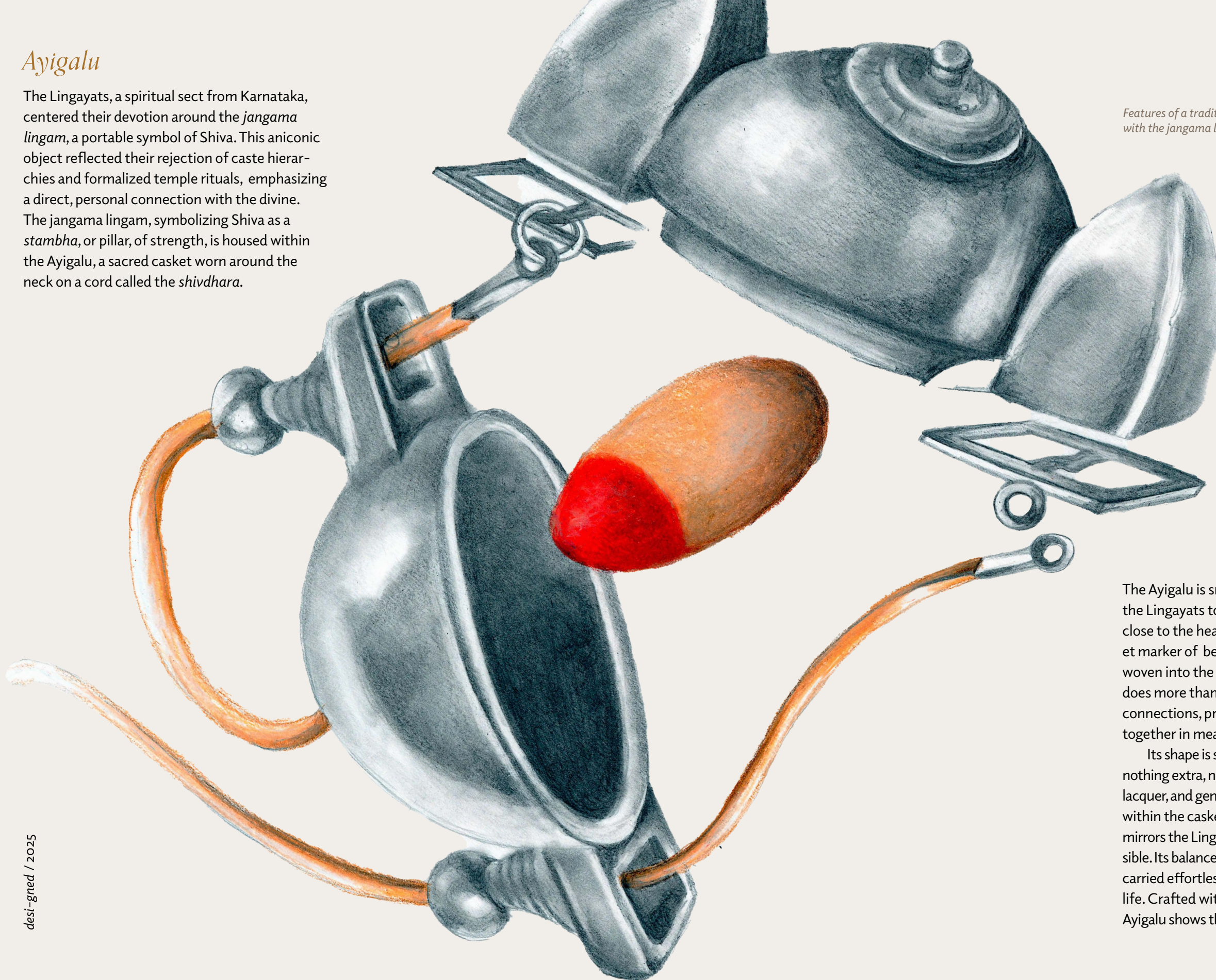


## Ayigalu

The Lingayats, a spiritual sect from Karnataka, centered their devotion around the *jangama lingam*, a portable symbol of Shiva. This aniconic object reflected their rejection of caste hierarchies and formalized temple rituals, emphasizing a direct, personal connection with the divine. The *jangama lingam*, symbolizing Shiva as a *stambha*, or pillar, of strength, is housed within the Ayigalu, a sacred casket worn around the neck on a cord called the *shivdhara*.

matter

Features of a traditional ayigalu,  
with the jangama lingam inside.



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The Ayigalu is small but full of meaning. It allows the Lingayats to keep something sacred, safe, and close to the heart. Worn daily, it becomes a quiet marker of belonging, a reminder that belief is woven into the fabric of a collective. Great design does more than serve an individual; it nurtures connections, preserves traditions, and brings people together in meaningful ways.

Its shape is simple, its purpose transparent—nothing extra, nothing wasted. Soft cotton, smooth lacquer, and gentle curves all come together as layers within the casket. The portability of the Ayigalu mirrors the Lingayat ethos of making worship accessible. Its balanced form and weight allow it to be carried effortlessly, making devotion a part of daily life. Crafted with care and clear intentions, the Ayigalu shows that thoughtful design speaks for itself.



## Bhiksha Patra

matter

Belief can bridge cultures, aligning diverse traditions and crafts toward a shared purpose. It is in these moments of collaboration that the essence of unity shines brightest—when different perspectives and practices converge to create something meaningful.

The bhiksha patra embodies the deep-seated link between material objects and spiritual journeys. Crafted by Muslim *kharadis* (woodworkers) in the Thar Desert, this simple bowl reflects the Jain principle of a non-material life. Shaped with care, it is turned by hand and crafted to perfection. Every detail reflects the dedication of the maker, a quiet devotion woven into its form. It's not just about holding food—it holds skill and tradition. Produced in small batches, the bowls are a testament to heritage and respect.



*A stacked set of bhiksha patra bowls, crafted from Rohida wood. The image highlights the variation in size.*

Jain Svetambara monks are often seen in simple, white, unstitched robes and walking barefoot. They carry a small broom to gently sweep the ground, embodying purity and strict nonviolence. For them, the bhiksha patra collects every single morsel of food. When broken, it is buried to honor its return to the earth, symbolizing detachment from material possessions and a commitment to simplicity. Despite this, they often make it their own—some add lacquered details for identification and to enhance its longevity.

This bowl tells a story of cultural harmony, as Muslim artisans create these bowls for Jain monks they show that craftsmanship has no borders. No matter where or by whom something is made, the passion for creation is universal. That love is a gift, passed from maker to user. It's proof that great design isn't just about function—it's about the human spirit flowing in every creation.



## Sindoor Dibbi

The sindoor dibbi (sindoor box) is much more than a container for vermilion powder; it is a keeper of tradition. Modeled after Hindu temples and their *shikharas* (spires), its form echoes the idea of transmitting cosmic energies into everyday life. This portable personal temple holds value through both practicality and spiritual celebration.

Sindoor, a vermilion powder, represents a bond of devotion. During the *sindoor-daan*—a part of Hindu marriage ceremonies—a groom gives the bride her first sindoor dibbi, marking the start of a sacred union. The powder itself, applied to the parting of the bride's hair, is a vivid symbol of this relationship. Wearing the sindoor keeps this connection alive.

This object is an example of how belief permeates everything we do in our own cultures. The sindoor dibbi is a personal shrine to love and unity. In its small size, it holds the weight of centuries of tradition. Its portability speaks to the nomadic

nature of belief—shaping our journeys and anchoring us in our heritage. Design is imbued in all aspects of our lives. Ceremony has design, and so does ritual. The sindoor dibbi is a designed object that lies at the intersection of the two.

Though distinct in form and function, all of these objects are rooted in the essence of nomadic worship. They embody adaptability and are designed to accompany believers on their journeys, evolving to meet specific spiritual and practical needs. Their designs balance functionality with meaning, elevating ordinary materials to sacred devices.

The simplicity of the Sindoor dibbi, the elegance of the *bhiksha patra*, or the compact sanctity of a *jangama lingam* reflects design principles that solve immediate needs like portability and durability while simultaneously evoking deeper, universal connections. They transcend mere utility, becoming symbols of faith that carry within them countless beautiful stories and journeys.

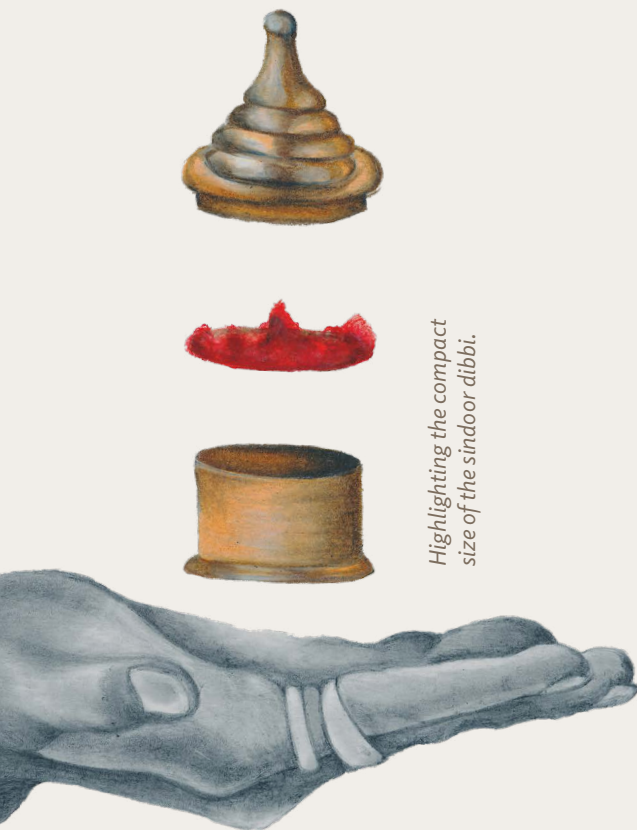
*An ode to the vibrant red hue of sindoor.*

matter

24

25

26



Highlighting the compact size of the sindoor dibbi.



Ultimately, these artifacts remind us that great design is not static: it moves with us, adapts to us, and reflects our deepest beliefs. It celebrates impermanence, enriches the human experience, and teaches us that the true purpose of design is not to reach a fixed point but to embrace the endless path—to create for the journey, not the destination.



# ROOTS

Written by Siddharth Thuppil  
Designed by Chahak Surana

Indian cuisine is a celebration of bold, complex flavors, shaped by centuries of tradition and a rich history of cultural exchange. Across the subcontinent, each region brings its own distinctive approach, creating a vibrant mosaic of dishes. From the fiery tang of Southern curries to the delicate sweetness of Northern desserts, Indian food offers something for every palate. But it's not just the flavors that make this cuisine unique—it's the remarkable variety of ingredients that define it.

Would it surprise you to know that many of the ingredients we consider staples in Indian cooking actually didn't originate in South Asia at all?

Over the course of millennia, merchants, travelers, and colonizers introduced new produce to the subcontinent, where the fertile land and diverse climate allowed them to thrive. Expert chefs, with their profound understanding of spices and textures, found ways to integrate these foreign ingredients into their cuisine. Ingredients that were once outsiders now feel like irreplaceable components of Indian dishes.

Come explore 15 ingredients that are integral to the taste of India, but have their roots elsewhere!

## TOMATOES

ORIGIN	South America
ARRIVAL	16th century, via Portuguese traders

Introduced to India by the Portuguese, tomatoes quickly became essential in Indian cooking. Their tangy, juicy flavor balanced the richness of curries and gravies. Over time, tomatoes transformed iconic dishes like butter chicken and sambar, becoming a staple in Indian kitchens for their versatility, vibrant color, and nutritional value.

Now found in Butter Chicken, Sambar, Dal Tadka

## OKRA

ORIGIN	West Africa
ARRIVAL	Ancient, via trade routes

Okra, or *bhindi*, traces its origins back to West Africa, where the Bantu tribes cultivated and spread it across the continent through their extensive trade networks. The vegetable flourished in India's diverse climates, quickly becoming a staple in regions like Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, and Bengal. Known for its distinct texture and slightly sticky quality, okra adapted beautifully to Indian spices.

Now found in Sambar, Poriyal

## FENUGREEK

ORIGIN	Mediterranean Region
ARRIVAL	Ancient, via trade routes

Fenugreek, with its distinctive bitter flavor, traveled from the Mediterranean to India in ancient times. Over the centuries, it became an integral part of Indian cuisine, in the form of both seeds and leaves, adding a depth of flavor to curries, dals, and pickles. Beyond its culinary uses, fenugreek has long been valued in Ayurvedic and traditional medicine for its ability to aid digestion, regulate blood sugar, and promote lactation in nursing mothers.

Now found in Methi Paratha, Aloo Methi, Pickles

## SAFFRON

ORIGIN	Iran
ARRIVAL	5th BCE, via Persian traders

Saffron first arrived in India along the trade routes of Persia, carried by merchants who valued it as much for its deep golden hue as for its delicate floral aroma. By the time of the Mughal Empire, saffron had become synonymous with royal cuisine, coloring the fragrant rice of biryanis and lending its luxurious essence to desserts. Though Iran remains the world's largest producer, India's own Kashmiri saffron is among the most prized varieties in the world.

Now found in Shrikhand, Kesar Pista Kulfi

## CHICKPEAS

ORIGIN	Middle East & Mediterranean
ARRIVAL	Ancient, via Middle Eastern traders

Chickpeas were cultivated in the Middle East long before they reached India, but once they did, they became a staple protein source, especially in vegetarian diets. The Indian subcontinent developed its own varieties, including *kala chana* (black chickpea), which are widely used in curries and Indian street food.

Now found in Chana Masala, Pani Puri, Dhokla



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Now found in Tami

matter

## SUGARCANE

ORIGIN	Papua New Guinea & Southeast Asia
ARRIVAL	5th BCE, via Austroasiatic migration

Though India perfected the art of refining sugar, the sugarcane plant itself came from Southeast Asia. Early Indian civilizations quickly adapted it, developing techniques for crystallizing sugar that later spread to Persia and Europe. Ancient texts reference sugarcane as a crop of the Ganges basin due to its abundance, and today, India remains one of the largest producers of both sugar and jaggery.

Now found in *Ganne ka Ras, Jalebi, Mysore Pak*

## TAMARIND

ORIGIN	Africa, specifically Sudan & tropical Africa
ARRIVAL	Ancient, via trade routes

Tamarind made its way to India through ancient trade routes and quickly became indispensable, especially in South Indian cuisine. Its tangy, sour profile lends a signature sharpness to many dishes, from the rich tamarind rice to the tangy base of *sambar*. Tamarind also plays a vital role in *chutneys*, *curries*, and *pickles*, balancing the heat of spices with its refreshing acidity.

Now found in *Tamarind Chutney, Pani Puri*

## ASAFOETIDA

ORIGIN	Afghanistan & Iran
ARRIVAL	6th BCE, via Persian traders

Asafoetida, or *hing*, traveled to India from the dry highlands of Afghanistan and Iran. Persian traders first introduced it to Indian markets. Jain and Brahmin communities—especially in North India—embraced it as a pungent alternative to onions and garlic, which many avoided for religious reasons. Over time, its bold umami flavor became an essential component of Indian lentil dishes and tempering spices.

Now found in *Dal Tadka, Sambar, Kadhi*

## ONION & GARLIC

ORIGIN	Central Asia & the Mediterranean
ARRIVAL	5th BCE, via early trade routes

Onions and garlic came to India through the earliest trade links with Central Asia and the Mediterranean. While these alliums are widely used in everyday cooking, certain religious and ascetic groups avoided them, believing they heightened passion and desire. Despite this, onions and garlic became indispensable, forming the backbone of countless spice pastes, pickles, and curries across India.

Now found in *Onion Pakoras, Garlic Naan, Rogan Josh*

## POTATOES

ORIGIN	South America
ARRIVAL	16th century, via Portuguese traders

Brought to India by the Portuguese, potatoes were first cultivated in Goa before spreading across the subcontinent. The British further encouraged their growth during the colonial period, making them one of India's most widely consumed vegetables. Potatoes adapted effortlessly to Indian flavors, absorbing spices beautifully and lending their starchy goodness to countless dishes. From stuffed *parathas* to spicy roasts, they are now a cornerstone of Indian cuisine.

Now found in *Dum Aloo, Samosa*

## COFFEE

ORIGIN	Ethiopia
ARRIVAL	17th century, via Sufi saint Baba Budan

Legend has it that the Sufi, Baba Budan, smuggled seven coffee beans from Yemen and planted them in Karnataka's hills. This marked the beginning of coffee cultivation in India. By the British era, coffee plantations flourished in South India, and the region developed a unique filter coffee culture, where strong brewed coffee is mixed with frothy milk and served in brass tumblers.

Now found in *South Indian Filter Coffee*

## NUT VARIETIES

ORIGIN	Americas
ARRIVAL	17th-18th centuries

Brought to India during European colonial expansion, cashews and peanuts quickly integrated into Indian cooking. Cashews were used in rich gravies and sweets, while peanuts became a popular snack and street food ingredient. Today, both nuts are essential in dishes like *korma* and peanut *chikki*, contributing crunch, creaminess, and richness to Indian cuisine.

Now found in *Kaju Katli, Dabeli*

## CHILLIES

ORIGIN	South America
ARRIVAL	16th century, via Portuguese traders

Before chillies, black pepper was India's primary source of heat. But when the Portuguese brought fiery red chillies from the Americas, they quickly became a sensation. Their ease of cultivation and intense spiciness made them an instant favorite, replacing pepper in many dishes. From the deep-red Kashmiri chili used for color to the scorching Bhut Jolokia from the northeast, chillies now define Indian cuisine. No spice is more indispensable to the Indian palate.

Now found in *Vindaloo, Chettinad Curries*

## CLOVES

ORIGIN	Indonesia
ARRIVAL	1st century, via maritime trade

Native to the Maluku Islands in Indonesia, cloves were introduced to India by spice traders sailing across the Indian Ocean. While initially valued for their medicinal properties, Indian cooks soon discovered their deep, warm flavor and began incorporating them into their spice blends and tea powders.

Now found in *Biryani, Chai*

## MUSTARD

ORIGIN	Mediterranean Region
ARRIVAL	1st century, via early trade routes

Mustard, native to the Mediterranean, has been a vital part of Indian cuisine for millennia. Brought by early traders, mustard seeds flourished in India's fertile plains, especially in Bengal, Punjab, and Gujarat. Beyond its spice, mustard oil became a prized cooking medium, loved for its bold, pungent flavor. Today, mustard seeds are key in tempering, infusing dishes with their signature nutty and spicy warmth.

Now found in *Bengali Fish Curry, Sarson da Saag*

S

plays a vital role in *chutneys*, *curries*, and *pickle*  
balancing the heat of spices with its refreshing ac  
Now found in *Tamarind Chutney, Pani Puri*



IN 2023, WE STOOD IN THE GRAND GALLERY OF THE RISD MUSEUM TO CELEBRATE THE LAUNCH OF THE FIRST ISSUE OF *DESI-GNED*. SURROUNDED BY EUROPEAN ARTWORKS, WHOSE MATERIALS AND MOTIFS OFTEN TRACE BACK TO THE GLOBAL SOUTH, WE WERE CONFRONTED BY THE CONTEXT WITHIN WHICH WE CREATE. IN RESPONSE, WE *INTERVENED*.

BY INTERVENING, WE SOUGHT TO *SURFACE* WHAT HAS BEEN MARGINALIZED AND ERASED, *FOSTER* DIALOGUE BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT, *RESHAPE* THE STORIES INSTITUTIONS CHOOSE TO TELL, AND *ILLUMINATE* THE COMPLEXITY OF HISTORIES THAT ARE TOO OFTEN SIMPLIFIED OR IGNORED. WHAT FOLLOWS IS A VIGNETTE OF OUR RESPONSE.

# (Re)Painting Histories

CREATED BY YUKTI V. AGARWAL

Museum interventions are acts of creative resistance. They ask us to look again—at what is shown, what is hidden, and why. In 1969, Andy Warhol was invited to “raid” the RISD Museum’s storage. Warhol’s *Raid the Icebox I* is recognized as “the first and possibly most significant artist-curated show of the modern era.” He didn’t tell a new story; instead, Warhol exposed the arbitrary nature of the existing one, raising enduring questions about who decides what is valuable, beautiful, or worthy of preservation. Since then, interventions have evolved as a powerful tool of critique—manifesting through exhibitions, digital projects, performance, and reimaginings of institutional architecture and habits.

*(Re)Painting Histories* steps into the tradition of museum interventions to trouble the silences surrounding colonialism and cultural exchange. Briefly installed in the museum’s Grand Gallery, *(Re)Painting Histories* features over twenty re-written labels that “re-paint” subaltern histories—surfacing connections that are often overlooked or unspoken. From Rembrandt’s Mughal influences to the South Asian origins of pigments like yellow and ultramarine, the intervention traces colonial entanglements embedded in European art. It challenges the dominant narratives upheld by museums—particularly in their “grand” galleries where histories of conquest, trade, and cultural borrowing often go unacknowledged.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIK GOULD

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(RE)PAINTING HISTORIES AT  
THE MUSEUM’S GRAND GALLERY



## The Resurrection of Christ

Dutch, ca. 1640  
RISD Museum, No. 62.019  
*Georgianna Sayles Aldrich  
and Mary B. Jackson Funds*

This scene portrays an episode from the New Testament. As an angel removes the stone from Christ's tomb, Christ is presented symbolically in the burst of divine light that blinds the Roman guards who scatter, fall, and lift their swords in defense. Cuyp dramatized the event by using a nearly monochromatic contrast of light and shadow and sketchy brushstrokes that enhance the frenetic atmosphere. Like the contemporary Dutch painter Rembrandt, he focused on the humble aspects of religious narrative, espousing a central belief of the Protestant Reformation, that individual worshippers may seek a personal relationship with God.

— RISD Museum

Bathed in a glowing warmth, the subtle golden tones surrounding Christ evoke the signature radiance of Indian Yellow. Indian Yellow, *piuri*, is a pigment renowned for its unusual orange-yellow hue, striking optical luminescence, and exceptional lightfastness. Captivated by the vibrancy of yellow tones in Mughal and Rajput paintings, the British began sourcing the rare *piuri* pigment from the *gwalas* (cow-herders) of Bengal in the 17th century. Costly and difficult to obtain, the pigment was used sparingly by European artists to achieve luminous effects, appearing in some of the most iconic works of European art—from Rembrandt's *Belshazzar's Feast* (1635–38) to Van Gogh's *Starry Night* (1889).

For centuries, the origin and method of producing the pigment remained a mystery. It wasn't until 1883 that the jaundiced hue of Indian Yellow was traced to a merciless process: cattle were fed only mango leaves and water. Malnourishment and dehydration caused the cows' urine to turn a bright shade of yellow. The urine was then boiled down to a syrupy consistency and dried into a dirty yellow sediment. This was shipped to England in sealed packages—many addressed to *Messrs. Winsor and Newton*, the namesakes of the paint brand still used in art studios around the world.



*Design for a palanquin, ca. 1850–1890, graphite, ink, and watercolor (most likely Indian Yellow) on paper, South Asian (Banaras, India), RISD Museum, No. 1986.151.10. Gift of Catherine and Ralph Benkaim*



*Indian Yellow pigment — made using cow's urine in Bengal and shipped to England. Image Credit: Technical University of Dresden*





## Portrait of Antoine-Georges-François de Chabaud-Latour and His Family

French, 1806  
RISD Museum, No. 2003.105  
*Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund*

Portraiture and history painting come together in this tribute to family devotion. Tenderly instructing his daughter and son, Antoine-Georges-François de Chabaud-Latour gestures toward a monument to his own father, a distinguished military man and engineer. The carved epitaph—he lived and died without reproach—provides a lesson in virtue for the following generations. Chabaud-Latour's wife, Juliette, stands beside him, nursing their infant son, demonstrating the importance of maternal strength to the future of family and nation. The portrait is situated in the landscape of Nîmes in southern France, home to both the artist and the Chabaud-Latour family.

— RISD Museum

After Empress Josephine received a Kashmiri shawl from Napoleon, the fine *pashmina* (goat's wool) became a ubiquitous symbol of wealth and status in French society. Chabaud-Latour's wife is wrapped in a fine *sozni* (silk or wool embroidered) or *kani* (double interlocking twill tapestry woven) Kashmiri shawl featuring intricate patterning along the *pallu* (border). The shawl has a dark ground—a characteristic uncommon in many export shawls at the time, suggesting that it was likely purchased in the South Asian subcontinent and not in Europe. The creation of a single Kashmiri shawl requires more than fifteen specialized craftsmen, including spinners, dyers, pattern drafters, and weavers. Making a single shawl of this quality can take up to one year.

The Anglicized term “cashmere” exemplifies the erasure of identity and the appropriation of native crafts, such as the labor-intensive, traditional crafts of shawl weaving and embroidery from Kashmir that typified the colonial conquest. The capitalist tendencies that emerged from this appropriation continue to impact the industry and communities that have practiced the craft for generations. Local artisans have long struggled to compete with mass-market European Jacquard imitations that capitalize on traditional aesthetics for profit.



*Dochalla (double-sided shawl), ca. 1815, pashm (goat's hair) kani (double interlocking twill tapestry weave), South Asian (Kashmiri), RISD Museum, No. 78.192.3. Gift of Mrs. E. F. Smith and Mrs. Peter McBean*

*The shawl worn by Chabaud-Latour's wife closely resembles this one. Its large ambi boteh — mango-shaped motifs commonly known as 'paisley' — take their name from the Scottish town where Kashmiri shawls were once mass-produced.*



*Kashmiri artisans weave using the kani technique, working with multiple tujis (wooden bobbins). The resulting fabric features a finely interlocked tapestry weave—ornate in appearance, yet lightweight and structurally strong. Image Credit: Shuaib Bashir*





## Charity

French, ca. 1550  
RISD Museum, No. 57.157  
*Anonymous Gift*

The central figure of this allegorical painting represents Charity, who nurses one child while tenderly protecting five other mischievous babies. Her monumental figure and serpentine drapery emulate the dynamism of Italian painters and sculptors whose innovations exploded the rules of Renaissance classicism in the 1500s. Aspects of Italian Mannerism, including elongated figures and strained poses, spread to France and the Netherlands and were widely disseminated through engravings. Embraced by the French king François I, who brought artists from Italy to decorate his country palace, a French version of Mannerism became known as the Fontainebleau School.

— RISD Museum

The hair adornments woven into Charity's elaborate braids reflect the enduring influence of South Asian aesthetics on Renaissance jewelry. From the delicate *filigree* (gold lattice) work to the clustered semiprecious stones, the headpiece closely resembles the *matha patti*—a traditional South Asian head ornament, typically crafted from strands of precious metal, pearls, or rare stones.

The origins of polychrome jewelry design can be directly traced to the South Asian subcontinent. Centuries before multicolored gemstone settings became fashionable in Europe, South Asian artisans were developing techniques such as *kundan* (pure gold stone-setting) and *meenakari* (enameling), combining technical mastery with symbolic and spiritual meaning. The region's rich access to colored stones—diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires, and pearls—gave rise to distinctive styles that flourished across empires and courts.

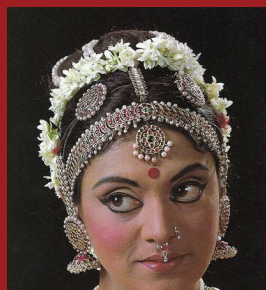
Ornate hair adornments in Western portraiture echo a Euro-American obsession with the “Orient.” Luxury houses such as Tiffany, Cartier, and Van Cleef & Arpels capitalized on this aesthetic, appropriating South Asian design languages while profiting from raw materials extracted through colonial networks across Asia, Africa, and South America.



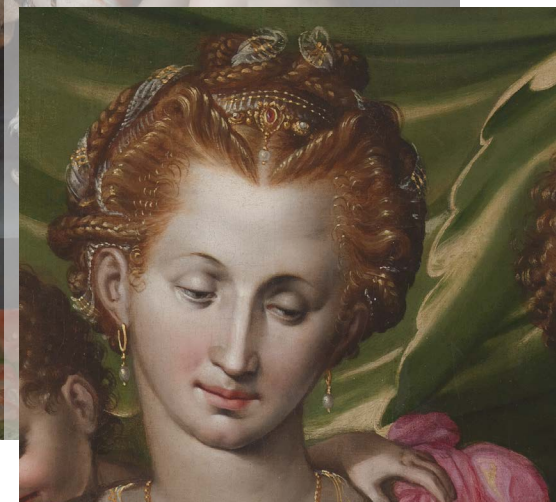
*Vakchutti* (headpiece), 1800s, rubies, emeralds, and pearls with gold, South Asian (India), RISD Museum, No. 67.221. Bequest of Martha B. Lisle



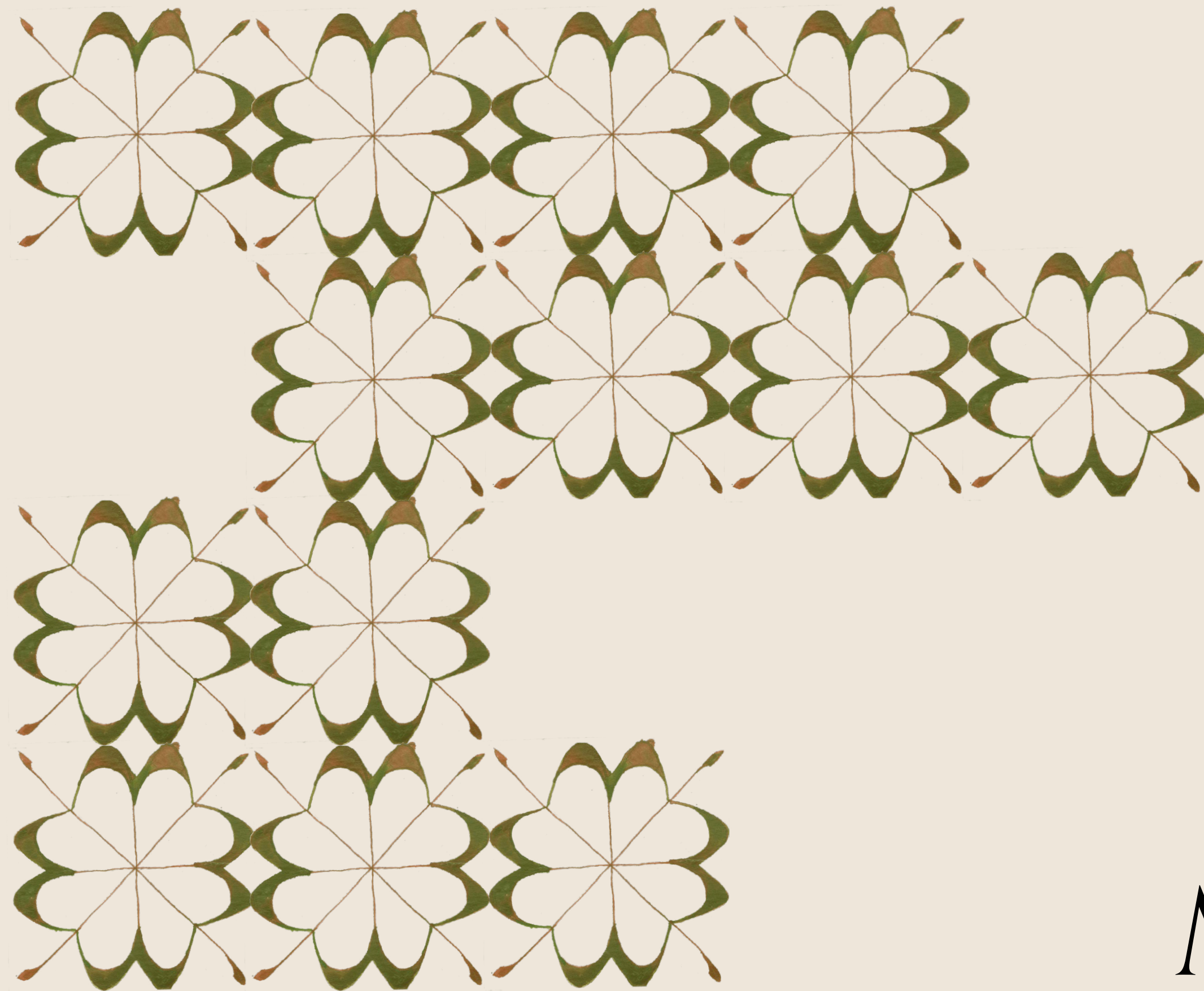
*Studies of various jewelry at the India Museum, 1914*, watercolor and pencil on paper by William Edgar Brigham, American, RISD Museum, No. 63.011.169. Gift of the Estate of William E. Brigham



Bharatanatyam dancer Swapna Sundari is adorned with traditional gold, ruby, and pearl head ornaments. The *thalaikkachchu* (three-part headband), *vakchutti* (forehead pendant), *jimiki* (dome-shaped hanging ornament), and *mattal* (attached chain) together form the classic adornment of a South Asian bride or royal woman. Image Credit: Oppi Untracht







Method

# Deracinating *Dharma*: Mindfulness Traditions in Psychology

3 Languages ▾

Appropriation hide

Mindfulness

- ☐ Spiritual
- ☐ Secular
- ☒ Commercial

Scripture

- ☒ Authentic
- ☐ Adopted
- ☐ Distorted

Enlightenment

- ☒ Immediate
- ☐ Embodied
- ☐ Unattainable

Article Talk

Read Edit View History Tools ▾

Written by *Chetanya Singh* | Designed by *Jyot Kaur Thind*

Paying attention to one’s breath is not generally considered inside the scope of commercial activity. Nonetheless, the [Eastern tradition](#) of [mindfulness meditation](#) has found its way into business models of Western enterprises—in many senses, becoming a product. [Headspace](#), a mental-health app offering everything from guided meditation to one-on-one coaching, advocates for a paid annual subscription; while [Muse](#), a brain-imaging headband, gives users real-time insight into their neural signals as they meditate. Meditation retreats claim to enable self-discovery for thousands of dollars. No longer restricted to [Buddhist](#) monastic circles, mindfulness has become a billion-dollar industry. The integration of this transformative Eastern practice into Western capitalism has itself been a process of change and transformation. It began as a faith-linked tradition in the Nepalese town of [Bodh Gaya](#), where [Gautam Buddha](#) attained [enlightenment](#).

Buddhism’s origins lay in Gautum Buddha’s observations about and prescriptions for human suffering in the [5th century BC](#). The core of Buddhist philosophy is expressed as an acknowledgement of human desire being the cause of one’s suffering, escaped only by detaching oneself from worldly objects through the practice of [virtue](#). In Buddhism, the [Eightfold Path](#)<sup>1</sup> is a guide to ethical living and spiritual development, leading to enlightenment and the end of suffering. Mindfulness, being the seventh step on the [Eightfold Path of Buddhism](#), aims to allow a Buddhist to align oneself with proper morality by contemplating on religious [scriptures](#) and objects. Notably, the practice entailed discomfort. [University of California](#), Berkeley’s [Robert Sharf](#), a professor of [Buddhist Studies](#), references the [Visuddhimagga](#)—a compendium of Buddhist teachings and traditions—to detail how meditation can often have characteristics similar to depressive states. The Buddhist lifestyle is meant to be a painful journey, as one effortfully escapes from the temptations of the material world. However, mindfulness is portrayed by [popular culture](#) as a calming technique. Rather than feeling similar to depression, it is purported to treat depressive symptoms. No longer do individuals need to [sacrifice](#) the modern world for mindfulness.

Indeed, its outcomes are meant to ensure one’s survival in a cutthroat world—[Navy SEALs](#) and [Google engineers](#) have become target audiences. Arguably, the aims of mindfulness now serve to perpetuate one’s existence in the world that Buddha sought to escape—a radical change over the last century that begets an explanation.

[Mahasi Sayadaw](#), a Burmese teacher in the 20th century, realized that Buddhist practices were concentrated to the most devoted monks. Requiring intense familiarity with religious literature and philosophy, along with hours of dedication, the faith simply wasn’t as accessible to laypeople: people with concerns of feeding their families and quotidian desires. Sayadaw saw this as an opportunity for [liberalization](#): individuals would no longer have to renounce lay life in order to practice mindfulness. The religious tradition transformed into an act of simply paying attention to one’s bodily sensations in a [non-judgmental](#) manner. Sayadaw aimed to integrate the practice into everyone’s lives by eliminating the devotional and time constraints that gatekept it. Philosophical depth was traded-off in exchange for ease of access, providing a valuable template for cultural migration to the busy, [secular](#) West.

In the 1970s, [Jon Kabat-Zinn](#), professor emeritus of Medicine at the [University of Massachusetts Medical School](#), influenced by a school of thought



The Noble Eightfold Path Wheel  
Image Credit: Wikipedia

<sup>1</sup>The Eightfold Path in Buddhism is a guide to ethical living and spiritual development, leading to enlightenment and the end of suffering. It consists of Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. These principles promote wisdom, ethical conduct, and mental discipline, forming the core of Buddhist practice.

- ☐ Spiritual
- ☐ Secular
- ☒ Commercial

- ☒ Authentic
- ☐ Adopted
- ☐ Distorted

- ☒ Immediate
- ☐ Embodied
- ☐ Unattainable

derivative of Sayadaw’s work, created the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, helping patients cope better with chronic pain. In the spirit of [de-spiritualization](#), Kabat-Zinn emphasized the need to demystify mindfulness. In his reflections, he wrote about discarding Eastern terminology such as [dharma](#), claiming “for obvious reasons, we do not teach MBSR in that way.” The deliberate undermining of mindfulness’ original, religious intent for improving access further is obvious in hindsight. Kabat-Zinn realized that Western audiences wouldn’t find foreign jargon appealing in their treatment options. In particular, knowledge derived from alternative sources would not meet the standard for medical certification boards. Heavy emphasis on [empiricism](#) effectively ruled out valuing traditional wisdom as a source of knowledge, let alone a tradition completely alien to Kabat-Zinn’s patients.

In the decades following Kabat-Zinn’s integration of alternative medical practices into his clinical practice, research began to explore how Zinn’s mindfulness strategy might alleviate symptoms of major [depressive disorder](#), [borderline personality disorder](#), [addiction](#), and [anxiety disorders](#). According to Professor of Psychology emeritus at [University of Kentucky](#), [Ruth Baer](#), the mechanisms of mindfulness training enable individuals to assess their negative thoughts or emotions without becoming reactive, making them comfortable with the discomfort. Research continues to grow on how mindfulness can change brain dynamics, altering the default pattern of activity which shapes the way experienced meditators respond to stressful situations.

In spite of mindfulness research being in its nascent stages, its growing popularity amongst individuals in the West is an indication of its value. The [Barre Center](#) for Buddhist Studies points out that secular mindfulness could be considered a [distillation](#) of Buddhist teachings, thereby not undermining the faith but allowing a broader audience to reap its benefits. Similar to a time when traditional Buddhism was the sole proprietor of mindfulness meditation, it is not pragmatic for the majority to become monks. Therefore, [secular mindfulness](#) can serve as a feasible vehicle for Western civilization on the pathway towards peace. Anecdotes of individuals previously ailing from depression or other psychological ailments serve as evidence for the rewards of Kabat-Zinn’s deracination. However, critics feel that the Western emphasis on quick-fixes, such as 10-minute breathing protocols or 8-week long programs to eradicate crippling depression, hides the larger issue with its social and economic systems. Individuals could be stressed due to [consumerism](#), social inequalities, and perhaps even a lack of higher meaning and community that traditional Buddhism could provide. Possibly, mindfulness is being used as a pressure-relief valve without addressing the underlying burdens of modern lifestyle leading to the rise in mental health disorders.

Several Buddhist communities and thought leaders view the widespread adoption of mindfulness with less cynicism. Instead of regretting its [cultural appropriation](#), the [Dalai Lama](#) views the empirical framework of studying meditative practices as a logical extension of Buddhism. At the 2005 [Society for Neuroscience](#) meeting, the Buddhist leader, to the surprise of many, proclaimed, “Empirical evidence should triumph over scriptural authority, no matter how deeply venerated a scripture may be.” Evidence of a good life from by the wisdom of the past, in his view, are only strengthened through the scientific process.

While the ethics of [deracination](#) can be argued endlessly, the fact of deracination highlights several key trends dominating Western civilization. Individuals are increasingly relying on the validation of centralized scientific institutions rather than religious ones. Despite the Dalai Lama’s endorsement, which highlights the rigor provided by scientific reductionism, secular mindfulness still atomizes people. Families and communities responsible for passing down traditions are now replaced by managerial [public health](#) agencies and [private corporations](#).

With [intercultural exchange](#) facilitated by [globalization](#), traditional communities must be on guard against dilution and be encouraged to preserve their identities, while Western institutions could benefit from historical transparency. Deracination creates opportunities for understanding how cultures emerge and the things we share in common. The emerging field of [Contemplative Studies](#) is a harbinger of numerous schools of thought that are arising as a consequence of [global](#) cultural interactions. Encouraging such cultural mindfulness could be the Eightfold Path for the West towards cultural [salvation](#).



Leaves from an Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra, India, West Bengal or Bangladesh  
Image Credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Buddhaghosa with Three Copies of Visuddhimagga  
Image Credit: Wikipedia





The tree  
will only

*“What is a rubber plant?”*

grow  
where it  
wishes

*“A fiction of colonial capitalist logic.”*

*How a “failed” rubber crop has shaped indigenous cultures in Northeastern India*

*Written by  
Chinmayi Rajaram*

*Designed by  
Sejal Gupta*

Amidst a forest landscape, strong winding roots float over hundreds of feet of foliage. These wild roots grow unrestrained, creating an essential mode of conveyance and a breathtaking addition to the forest landscape. This impressive structure is the Living Root Bridge, formed from the aerial roots of *Ficus Elastica*, the rubber tree. In the Northeastern Indian states of Meghalaya and Assam, this rubber tree, or “*Jri Bamon*” as they call it, has been used by the indigenous War-Khasi and Jaintia people to construct living root bridges for hundreds of years.

Aparajita Majumdar, assistant professor of History, Environment, and Society at Brown, came across the Jri Bamon tree while conducting her PhD fieldwork in Meghalaya with members of the Living Bridge Foundation. Established in the East Khasi Hills by Morningstar Khongthaw, a War-Khasi living root bridge builder, the foundation aims to conserve these bridges—a mission that deepened her understanding of their cultural and ecological significance. In the late 19th century, as the Northeast obtained the designation of a resource frontier, the rubber tree gained traction among independent European speculators who began colluding with local indigenous leaders for rubber. This went against the British colonial state’s desire to control all market transactions. Much of these interactions that took place outside of the sanctions of the colonial state were labeled as rubber smuggling, says Majumdar. This history of rubber smuggling has direct questions pertaining to indigenous sovereignty.

## The Uncontrollability of the Jri Bamon

The uncontrollability of the rubber trade became a large cause of anxiety for the British colonial state and therefore, in the 1870s, they decided to start their own rubber plantation in India. This began in the form of a monoculture cropping system. In 1873, the British state established a rubber plantation in Charduar, Assam.

But this tree came with an uncontrollability of its own.

The tree grows slowly, taking several decades to reach a stage where it can produce rubber profitably, making it ill-suited for the plantation economy. Despite weaker rubber trees being cut down in an attempt to organize and prune the plantation, new shoots rose stubbornly. Beneath the ground and hidden from the British gaze, the roots of the Jri Bamon had joined together, acting as both, a symbolic as well as physical resistance against the colonial attempt at thinning the plantation.

“This particular tree was recalcitrant to plantation politics,” Majumdar said. The failure to tame the rubber crop mirrored the failure of colonial authority in these hills.

When she started her research, Majumdar recognized an unmistakable environmental story wrapped underneath the political economy narrative. The *Ficus Elastica* wasn’t successful in the plantation economy due to its expansive and mobile growth pattern. The ideal commodity crop at the time was a bush plant that could give latex quickly. However, the “moodiness” of the tree was well understood by the indigenous War-Khasi and Jaintia people. “[The tree] will only grow where it wishes.”



Sketch of the joint root system of the *F. elastica* trees at Charduar, drawn by J. McKee, Assam, 1893.

In the borderland communities—communities living along and across national boundaries—it is not rubber but the tree’s aerial roots that hold most value, forming vital bridges in the very steep, slippery terrains where roads and other forms of mobility do not exist.

When the War-Khasi people design a living root bridge by shaping the roots, they do so in a way that allows the tree itself to eventually form the bridge. This approach to bridge-building transcends a single human lifetime.

Long before the colonial narratives portrayed hill communities as ‘uncivilized savages’ and those living on the plains as their refined counterparts, the two groups exchanged goods and moved freely between the Khasi Hills and plains. In 1873, the Inner Line Regulations established a boundary line throughout the northwestern tracts, separating the ‘savage’ hills from the ‘civilized’ plains. The Charduar plantations emerged at the same time, in foothills that once served as passages between hill and plain dwellers.

As the rubber plantations functioned like state reserve forests, they effectively excluded indigenous communities from accessing their land and resources. They lost access to many of the markets that existed in the plains. The indigenous communities of Charduar were not only rubber traders but also had vibrant salt and rice trading networks. While rubber was just one of the resources they dealt with, the colonial state reduced their identity solely to that of rubber tappers.

Majumdar’s book project, *Planting Recalcitrance: Nature, Knowledge and Heritage in a South Asian Borderland* examines the history of rubber extraction in the northeastern tracks of British India in the 19th century while also studying the story of how this failed commodity crop opened so many alternative “life-worlds”.

“What is seen as a failure within the colonial capitalist logic was actually a source of indigenous collaboration along the India-Bangladesh borderlands,” Majumdar said.

What the borderland communities deserve today, Majumdar says, is “the right to opacity”. They have the right to remain beyond the restrictive categories imposed on them during colonial times. In regions like the borderlands, the right to opacity becomes even more vital. Borderlanders are often forced to choose allegiances between dominant nation-states, siding with one megastructure or another. Yet historically, these communities have always lived in ways that defy such binaries, traversing borders and inhabiting spaces that boundaries cannot neatly contain.

The living root bridge is a manifestation of the persistence of this way of life.

The Jri Bamon enables the War-Khasi people to navigate their landscape, cross steep gorges, and access border markets. In her book, *Recalcitrant Lifeworlds of a Tree*, Majumdar recounts meeting with a political science student from a border village. She and her grandmother had used an off-road path to reach border markets where the War-Khasi people would trade bay leaves and betel nuts for fish and electronics from Sylhet, Bangladesh.

Practices like the living root bridges are not new but represent a tree-building tradition that is over 500 years old, a world that predates colonial empires. Recognizing such enduring institutions reveals how temporary these borders truly are when viewed through the lens of these long-lasting infrastructures.



# The Alchemy

*Folklore, such as Fanditha, evolves through retelling. My work engages with this tradition while remaining mindful of the ethics of reinterpreting traditions that I, as a researcher and writer, view from the perspective of an outsider. While the traditions of Fanditha linger, this piece is a work of fiction.*

Fanditha refers to the oral and esoteric Maldivian folklore practices which refer to black magic or sorcery. It is practiced by the mystical *fanditha veriyas*, usually men, fabled to have the power to summon forces that could heal a soul or command an evil spirit, a *jinn*.

Underneath the moonlit Maldivian skies, where palm trees whisper secrets to the waves, ~~ancient stories~~ Fanditha was born—a delicate interlace of black and white, folklore *and fear*, benevolence *and malevolence*. This brew is not merely a recipe but a ritual—a reflection of humanity’s fragile dance with forces beyond its control. Every ingredient carries a dual purpose, every step reflects intention. The result is a potion steeped in stories *and shadows*, a living echo of Maldivian folklore.

Written by Siya Girdhar  
Designed by Jyot Kaur Thind

## Ingredients:

- Coconut Water: Cleanses and restores balance, while binding spirits *and strengthening hidden connections.*
- Cloves: Deflects harm against negativity, *but tempts unseen forces with its intoxicating aroma.*
- Basil Leaves: *Shields against <sup>dark</sup> forces, yet extends an invitation to spirits beyond the veil.*
- Ginger: Cuts through curses but its fiery nature *can also provoke and sever connections with spirits.*
- Black Sesame Seeds: Acknowledges harmless occult forces, *or feeds them to strengthen their influence.*
- Sea Salt: Purifies and protects, while creating thresholds that can imprison spirits.
- Lime Juice: *Ensures closure, cutting all ties and leaving the ritual sanctified, while banishing spirits.*

*Cook Time: From dusk's first rustle to dawn's final breath.*

## Instructions:

- Begin in silence. ~~Its ripples should reflect your intention.~~ The air should be still and free from any distraction.
- Place a heavy pot over low heat and pour in 2 cups of coconut water. Allow the ripples to reflect your intention.
- Add a teaspoon of crushed cloves and ~~a teaspoon of black sesame seeds to the same pot.~~ *Stir with the direction in mind:*
- *Clockwise to draw protection and calm energies and counterclockwise to call forth the hidden forces.*
- Pause and feel the shift around you, as if the space itself is listening.
- Gently place 3 basil leaves on the surface of the brew. They will drift momentarily, forming a fragile layer—this is both a protector and a messenger, bridging the realms of the seen and unseen.
- With deliberate force, smash a thumb-sized piece of ginger, releasing its fiery essence. Add it to the brew, its piercing quality clearing lingering energies and releasing what no longer belongs.
- Take the sea salt, *pinch by pinch*, and scatter it all over the surface. Watch as the grains dissolve, swirling into a delicate veil ~~—an unseen boundary~~ an unseen boundary that protects and contains energies within.
- Lastly, squeeze 1 drop of lime juice into the pot to enhance the brew, ensuring clarity and finality in the ritual.
- Let the brew simmer for a few minutes. Stay focused—the steam will rise like tendrils, bursting with energy. When the brew starts feeling alive with purpose, remove it from the flame.

## Final Warning :

*Fanditha is a sacred conveyance between realms, but its power ~~jinn~~ ~~are known to linger near an unfinished~~ demands respect. The forces that you summon do not fade — they wait.*

*Remember to dispose of the potion with reverence: cast it into flowing water to carry energy or bury it where no one will disturb its sanctity. In Maldivian lore, jinns are known to linger near an unfinished ritual, drawn to the energy left behind like moths to fading embers.*

*Leave no trace, for the spirits bound within are not easily forgotten. Seal the ritual tightly, lest its whispers follow you home, burgeoning with every passing night.*



# C O N S C I O U S

# C R E A T I V I T Y

Written by Yukti V. Agarwal  
Designed by Mehek Gopi Vohra

## CREATIVITY

Creativity is emergent. It arises from systems of interaction, governed by a shared logic of novelty and spontaneity. Unlike algorithmic tasks with clear solutions, creative challenges demand **divergent thinking**—generating multiple possibilities—and **convergent thinking**—synthesizing them into viable forms. Outcomes can range from concrete ideas to ephemeral moments of expression that are discovered through iteration.

Creativity is relational and fundamentally social. From the cooperative practices of early human societies to the interconnected workflows of today's knowledge economies, group efforts have always driven progress. Creativity doesn't occur in a vacuum; it's shaped by emotional and social environments. It's a sociocultural phenomenon—it does not reside in individual minds. It is distributed across culture, materials, symbols, and shared meaning. The **group mind** exceeds the sum of its parts and challenges the idea that creativity can be reduced to individual input alone.

*The story we often tell about creativity is that of the lone genius—working in isolation, suddenly struck by a flash of insight. This narrative suggests that creativity is an unstructured, boundless force that emerges from individual brilliance. But that perception distorts the true nature of creative work. The breakthroughs we often attribute to singular minds are, in reality, the result of shared labor: where different ideas, skills, and lived experiences converge.*

Creativity is a complex, emergent process that flourishes through diverse perspectives and collective energy. [↗ CREATIVITY](#) This has been true across generations—in science, art, technology, and beyond.

Yet, the myth of the solitary creator persists. Part of this may stem from the discomforts of collaboration—many creatives report fear of judgment or the sense that working with others can compromise their agency. [↗ CREATIVE CRISIS](#) However, creativity doesn't unfold in isolation. It's a distributed process, where ideas evolve, shift, and deepen through exchange. It's not just about the 'work,' but the systems that shape it: the networks, tensions, feedback loops, and most of all, the relationship between the self and others.

The Conscious Creativity (C-C) framework offers a new model. Creativity is not a solitary spark but an ongoing, relational practice—one that unfolds across time and space through intentional, collaborative engagement. By pushing back against traditional, individualistic models, this framework reveals how innovation truly emerges: not from a space of ego, but from a collective intelligence.

[↗ CREATIVE PARADOX](#)

Creativity is less about static traits and more about dynamic interactions. At the core of this inquiry is the relationship between <sup>1</sup>**THE SELF**, <sup>2</sup>**THE COLLECTIVE**, and <sup>3</sup>**THE ENVIRONMENT**—foregrounding the creative process as something that happens between people, within systems, and across contexts.

## CREATIVE CRISIS

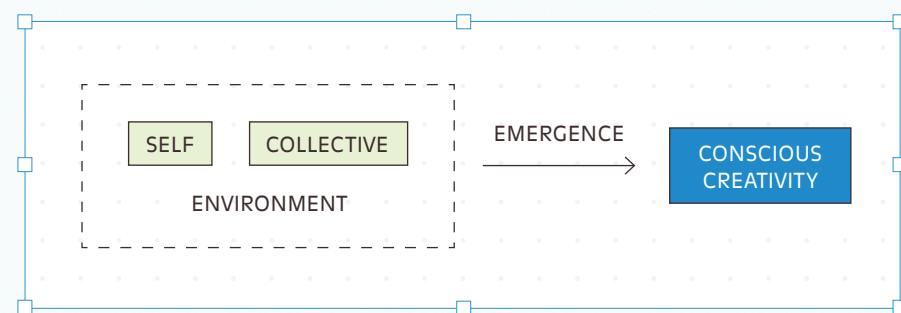
Collaboration can be hard—especially when one's **creative identity** is at stake. For many, creative work is deeply personal. It reflects one's voice, perspective, and values. This connection fuels dedication, but also makes feedback seem high-stakes. Creatives may resist collaboration out of the fear that their contributions will be diluted or misrepresented. In group settings, individual agency can feel fragile, leading to friction, withdrawal, or conflict.

## CREATIVE PARADOX

Here's the tension: structure can both block and unlock creativity. Bad frameworks—like rigid turn-taking or overly prescriptive roles—can stifle flow and worsen the very dynamics they're meant to facilitate. But thoughtful structure has the opposite effect: it can reduce dysfunction, encourage risk-taking, and create space for everyone to contribute.

Still, the deeper challenge isn't structure—it's people. Fear of vulnerability and resistance to compromise can derail even the best designed systems. Reimagining collaboration requires a shift in mindset: creatives must move beyond self-protection and toward a new sense of **self-in-collective**. It means designing environments where trust, openness, and shared purpose are prioritized.

The C-C framework is explained in detail, with scholarly references, on the official site: [www.framework.yuktiagarwal.com](http://www.framework.yuktiagarwal.com)



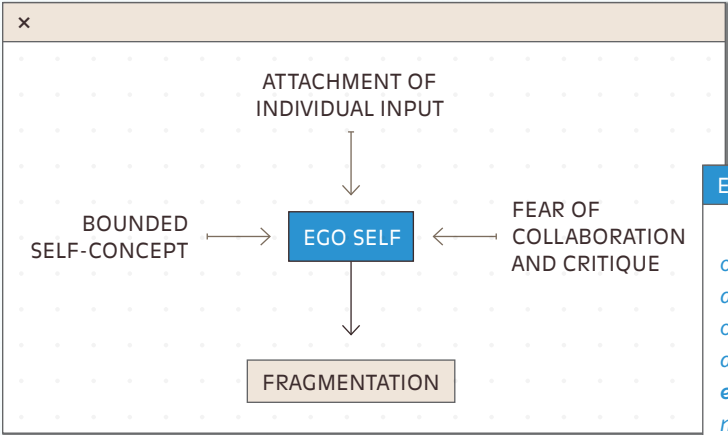


# THE SELF

Research on creativity often centers the individual as the primary unit of analysis—with individual creativity positioned as the cornerstone of innovation. While the Western conception of the self as autonomous, independent, and self-determining has undeniably fueled cultural and intellectual advancements, it has also introduced barriers to collaboration, undervaluing interdependence and relational processes. [↗ EGO SELF](#)

Creatives rely on a strong sense of individual identity for inspiration. The same ego-driven perspective can hinder their ability to fully participate in the processes that define true creativity. The paradox of the creative self—balancing personal voice with collective integration—requires a shift in how the self is understood, one that Eastern philosophies have long addressed.

Western views often define the self as discrete and bounded; Eastern traditions emphasize interdependence, impermanence, and relational identity. Buddhism, in particular, offers a framework for understanding existence as fundamentally interconnected, challenging the ego-driven model of self and offering creatives a path to harmonize individual identity with collective creation.



**EGO SELF**

*In individualistic cultures where personal identity, self-interest, and competition are prioritized over collective needs, people often develop a **bounded self-concept**—a defensively closed sense of self. This is the **ego-self**. Ego-driven attachment can manifest as a fear of external influence or dilution of vision, creating resistance to collaboration and critique. Sociocultural models of creativity identify the ego-self as a barrier to the openness and reciprocity necessary for collaborative innovation. For creatives, this is especially pronounced: the deeply personal nature of their work leads them to view creative output as an extension of their identity. The result can be fragmentation, as individual pursuits compete rather than coalesce—ultimately stalling the emergence of creativity.*

**CREATIVITY AS RELATIONAL**

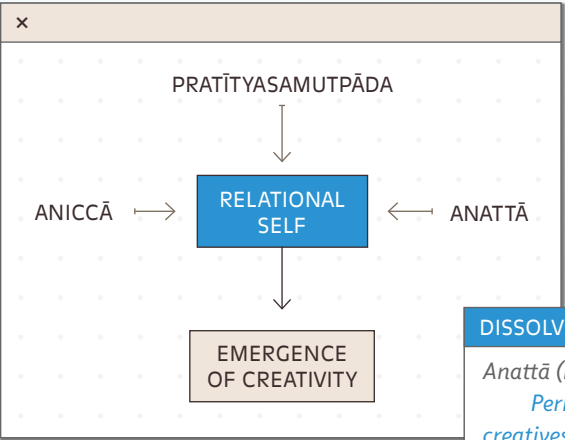
*Pratītyasamutpāda (Co-dependent Origination)*

*At the heart of Buddhism’s worldview is **pratītyasamutpāda**, or co-dependent origination—the idea that nothing exists independently; all phenomena arise in relation with other conditions. This aligns with contemporary research: theories of social development show that creative thinking is co-constructed through social interaction, and studies on network diversity suggest that exposure to different perspectives enhances creativity.*

*Pratītyasamutpāda means “**this exists because that exists.**” When applied to creativity, it reframes the process as one that emerges from interactions between individuals, ideas, and environments. Within the C-C framework, this principle reinforces the need to see the self as interdependent, empowering creatives to move beyond ego-driven isolation and engage in collaboration that amplifies emergent output.*

The concepts of *pratītyasamutpāda* (co-dependent origination) [↗ CREATIVITY AS RELATIONAL](#), *aniccā* (impermanence) [↗ ADAPTABILITY IN CREATIVITY](#), and *anattā* (no-self) [↗ DISSOLVING THE EGO](#) highlight how loosening attachment to rigid self-concepts enables both the expression of individuality and the facilitation of collective creativity.

This transformation of the self lays the foundation for developing a consciousness-based mindset. When individuals transcend egoic patterns and adopt a more fluid understanding of self, they become more adaptable, resilient, and open to exchange. Reimagining the self, as such, allows creatives to engage in dialogic, emergent processes that move beyond individual contributions—fostering a collective energy where the group, through shared exploration, achieves more than any one person could alone.



**DISSOLVING THE EGO**

*Anattā (No-Self)*

*Perhaps the most radical and transformative Buddhist teaching for creatives is **anattā**, or no-self. Anattā challenges the assumption of a fixed, autonomous self. It sees the self not as a stable entity, but as a construct—arising from impermanent aggregates like thoughts, emotions, perceptions. This concept aligns with psychological research on ego and self-concept. Studies in **self-determination** theory suggest that intrinsic motivation and self-regulation improve when individuals let go of egoic patterns and instead pursue tasks with authenticity and autonomy. Mindfulness-based approaches—many inspired by Buddhist traditions—also show that loosening attachment to the ego-self improves relational awareness and collaboration.*

*For creatives, **anattā** can be deeply liberating. It dissolves the impulse to guard one’s work as a piece of personal identity. Instead of asking “How do I protect my voice?” the question shifts to “How can my voice contribute to something larger?” This is not a dilution of self, but rather an amplification through collective enrichment.*

**ADAPTABILITY IN CREATIVITY**

*Aniccā (Impermanence)*

*The Buddhist concept of **aniccā**, or impermanence, disrupts attachment to fixed notions of the self and, by extension, creative identity. It is a reminder that all things are fluid, transient, and ever-changing. Research on adaptability and creative resilience echoes this: individuals with flexible mindsets are better able to adjust to change and integrate new ideas, a crucial skill in dynamic creative environments. Similarly, cultivating a **growth mindset** that entails welcoming feedback and embracing evolution—closely parallels the principle of **aniccā**.*

*The product of creativity is closely associated to the maker’s identity, which can lead to resistance when one’s vision is challenged or when collaboration requires compromise. Clinging to a fixed notion of creative identity—whether that’s a past success or a personal style—can lead to stagnation and defensiveness. Embracing **aniccā** allows creatives to remain open and iterative, contributing to a collective process that evolves in real time. The C-C framework integrates this principle by encouraging flexibility over control.*



2 THE COLLECTIVE

In disregarding self-development as an individual pursuit, one embraces it as a form of collective progress. Practices such as meditation, mindfulness, and self-reflection are not merely solitary exercises, but pathways toward deeper interconnectedness. Within Buddhism, such practices align with *bodhicitta*—the compassionate aspiration to benefit all beings. [↗ INTERBEING](#) Personal growth, in this view, is not self-serving but an act of service. Dissolving egoic boundaries shifts self-centered orientations towards a larger shared purpose, laying the groundwork for collaborative creativity.

This shift enables groups to evolve from loose constellations of talent into conscious collectives—cohesive creative systems where individuals engage in intentional, interdependent collaboration. Research on group dynamics suggests that collective intelligence doesn't necessarily depend on individual ability. [↗ COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE](#) Yet many creative teams falter not because of insufficient skill, but due to clashing visions, competition, and ego. Traditional solutions—such as clearer leadership or improved communication—often treat surface-level symptoms without addressing the root cause: the need for a fundamentally different outlook to collective creativity.

Buddhist principles of self-transcendence offer an alternative. The transformation of individual consciousness becomes a foundation for collaborative emergence, unfolding through three interrelated dynamics: *disciplined spontaneity*, *epistemic interdependence*, and *generative conflict*.

INTERBEING

The concept of interbeing emphasizes that all existence is interconnected. When applied to creativity, this mindset fosters **collaboration over competition**, dissolving rigid self-concepts in favor of collective purpose. Within conscious collectives, interbeing invites individuals to view their contributions not as isolated achievements, but as part of a larger, unfolding creative process.

COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE

A group's success depends less on the sum of individual intelligence and more on collective intelligence—shaped by **social sensitivity**, **equal participation**, and the ability to integrate **diverse perspectives**. Teams that foster interdependence consistently outperform those dominated by hierarchy or unchecked individualism, regardless of the overall intelligence quotient of the members.

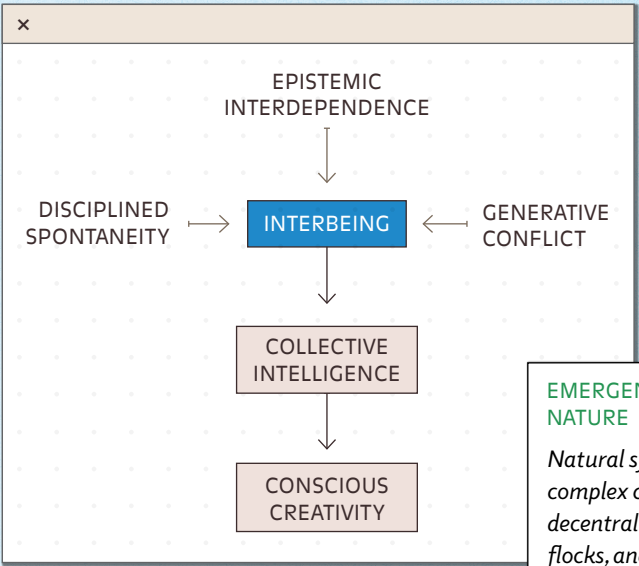
DISCIPLINED SPONTANEITY | EPISTEMIC INTERDEPENDENCE | GENERATIVE CONFLICT

Creative collaboration often swings between two extremes: rigid control and complete creative freedom. *Disciplined spontaneity* resolves this tension by creating conditions where structure enables exploration rather than constraining it. [↗ IMPROVISATIONAL CREATIVITY](#) This balance allows collectives to adapt and iterate—anchored by coherence, yet open to experimentation.

Psychological safety enables team members to trust that they can voice dissent without backlash. With this, real creative risks become possible. Structured practices help sustain this balance by making space for both order and responsiveness. [↗ EMERGENT ORDER IN NATURE](#) In the C-C framework—as seen in flocks of birds or swarms of bees—complex coordination can be achieved through simple, decentralized rules as structure and flexibility co-evolve.

IMPROVISATIONAL CREATIVITY

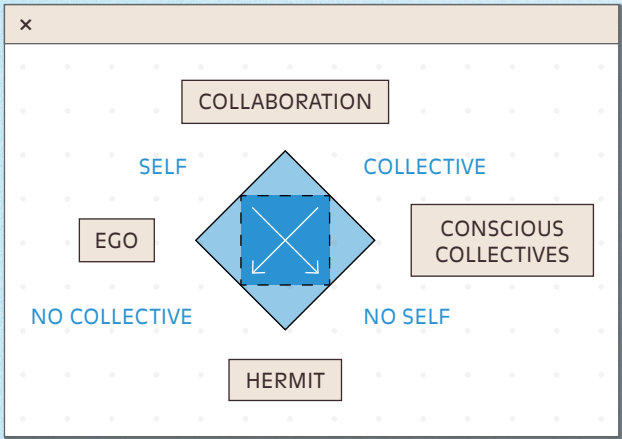
Improvisational systems demonstrate that structure and spontaneity are not opposites but complementary. In settings like jazz ensembles or improvisational theater, shared frameworks—such as rhythm, turn-taking, or thematic continuity—provide the scaffolding for real-time creative expression. Within collectives, this principle enables teams to adapt fluidly while maintaining coherence, allowing innovation to emerge through interaction rather than prescription.



EMERGENT ORDER IN NATURE

Natural systems illustrate how complex coordination can arise from decentralized processes. In swarms, flocks, and schools, organisms follow simple local rules—aligning, adjusting distance, and responding to neighbors—resulting in sophisticated group behavior without centralized control. Conscious collectives mirror this dynamic by using lightweight structures, such as rotational leadership or “take space, make space” principles, to support adaptive and self-regulating collaboration.





DISCIPLINED SPONTANEITY | EPISTEMIC INTERDEPENDENCE | GENERATIVE CONFLICT

Most collaboration models treat knowledge-sharing as a transactional exchange. In the C-C framework, collectives don't merely rely on each other's expertise—they engage in reciprocal knowledge-building. [➤ DISTRIBUTED COGNITION](#) Cognitive diversity becomes a generative force: different perspectives reshape how problems are understood and how solutions emerge.

Balancing this interdependence with individual specialization is key. Successful collectives avoid knowledge silos through ongoing feedback loops that keep information flowing and expertise adaptive—without overwhelming the system. This balance becomes self-sustaining when individuals internalize interdependence as part of their identity, cultivating intrinsic motivation to contribute authentically. [➤ SELF-CONSTRUAL](#) Over time, individual insights strengthen collective understanding, while the group's shared perspective deepens individual creativity.

**DISTRIBUTED COGNITION**

Conscious collectives operate like shared minds. Knowledge doesn't live in just one person—it moves fluidly through conversations, environments, and tools. In this system, collaboration becomes less about exchanging facts and more about evolving ideas together. Everyone brings a different lens, and when those lenses overlap, something new comes into focus. Interdisciplinary thinking thrives here—not by combining answers, but by changing the questions themselves.

**SELF-CONSTRUAL**

Creativity flows more easily when people see themselves as part of something bigger. In place of ego or ownership, there's a sense of shared purpose. When identity is rooted in connection—not separation—collaboration feels natural. People become more generous with their ideas, more open to change, and more motivated to build together. This mindset turns creative tension into fuel rather than friction.

**EPISTEMIC RESILIENCE**

Creative collaboration thrives when ideas are pressure-tested, not protected. Epistemic resilience is the ability to absorb critique, adjust perspectives, and evolve shared understanding without losing momentum. It's not just about tolerating disagreement—it's about relying on it as a mechanism for refinement. Conscious collectives cultivate this resilience through iterative dialogue, where challenge becomes a pathway to clarity and not collapse.

**NON-ATTACHMENT AND CREATIVE DIALOGUE**

Non-attachment doesn't mean detachment—it means holding ideas lightly enough to let them grow. When individuals decenter their egos from the creative process, conflict becomes less about defending territory and more about building something better together. This mindset makes space for dialogue that's candid, flexible, and generative—where listening is as valued as contributing.

DISCIPLINED SPONTANEITY | EPISTEMIC INTERDEPENDENCE | GENERATIVE CONFLICT

Conflict is often seen as a disruptive force in collaboration, yet in the C-C framework, it becomes a catalyst for creative emergence. Productive disagreement strengthens shared ideas and refines collective thinking. Adversarial collaboration, such as rigorous debate, when managed constructively, strengthens rather than weakens collective effort. [➤ EPISTEMIC RESILIENCE](#) Avoiding conflict, by contrast, may lead to false harmony—a surface-level agreement that stifles real innovation.

Generative conflict requires non-attachment: a willingness to engage in discussion without clinging to personal viewpoints. When individuals detach from ego-driven defensiveness, dialogue becomes more fluid, open, and constructive. [➤ NON-ATTACHMENT AND CREATIVE DIALOGUE](#) Conscious collectives integrate structures—like feedback protocols and flexible role distribution—that turn tension into traction. In these environments, trust is built not by avoiding disagreement, but by engaging with it transparently and respectfully.

By integrating *epistemic interdependence*, *disciplined spontaneity*, and *generative conflict*, conscious collectives create the conditions for ongoing innovation. In the C-C framework, creativity is no longer a product of isolated genius, but an emergent property of interdependent systems—alive, evolving, and shared.



# 3 THE ENVIRONMENT

The environment is often treated as a neutral backdrop for creativity—a static stage where ideas unfold. However, the environment doesn’t just host creativity—it helps generate it. The C-C framework positions environments as co-creative agents. They are physical spaces, social settings, and organizational structures that actively shape and evolve with collective creative processes.

[↗ ENVIRONMENT AS CO-CREATOR](#) This shift reframes the environment as a participant in creative emergence—constantly interacting with and adapting to the needs of the group.

When teams engage their environments intentionally, they create ‘enabling spaces.’ These environments both respond to and drive collaborative values in their design and use.

[↗ ENABLING SPACES](#) Physical space plays a particularly vital, and often overlooked, role. From open layouts that encourage spontaneous interaction to quiet zones that support reflection, intentional design fosters the adaptive flow that collectives rely on. [↗ DESIGNING FOR COLLECTIVE FLOW](#)

In the C-C framework, environments aren’t static—they’re responsive, alive, and essential to sustaining a thriving creative culture.

ENVIRONMENT AS CO-CREATOR

*In most conventional models, the environment is considered to be a passive container. However, as a co-creator, the environment is viewed not just in physical terms, but as an **ecosystem of relationships**, norms, affordances, and energies. For instance, a flexible room layout can invite fluid collaboration, just as hierarchical spatial design can reinforce power dynamics. Even non-physical elements—such as cultural norms, shared language, or institutional memory—constitute parts of the environment that impact how ideas are generated and received.*

ENABLING SPACES

*Enabling spaces are more than just well-designed rooms—they are living systems that mirror and amplify the creative rhythms of a group. These environments emerge through ongoing interaction between people and place. They are shaped not only by architects or managers, but by the micro-practices of the collective, such as how a group moves through a space, negotiates boundaries, shares tools, or marks territory over time.*

*In this sense, enabling spaces are co-produced. The key is mutual responsiveness: as the group experiments, iterates, and grows, the space itself transforms—through artifacts left behind, new rituals, or shifting spatial configurations. These seemingly small design choices and behavioral patterns form the **infrastructure of emergence**—the subtle architecture that enables new ideas to take root and grow.*

DESIGNING FOR COLLECTIVE FLOW

*Spatial design is not just about aesthetics or function. Environments that support both privacy and collaboration help groups navigate the tension between focused individual work and open collective dialogue. Features like flexible layouts, modular seating, and informal gathering areas encourage **spontaneous exchange** and creative momentum. Equally important are the cues that foster psychological safety. Creative emergence thrives in environments that are intentionally designed to invite curiosity, openness, and risk-taking—qualities at the heart of collective innovation.*

This is a manual for practicing *mettā*—a kind of meditation that helps you grow love and kindness for yourself and the whole world. It’s meant to support you as you embark on your journey as a **conscious creative**: someone who uses awareness, compassion, and collaboration in their creative process.

We use the word **manual** intentionally. Like a car that runs on muscle power instead of auto-pilot, this practice is something that you guide yourself—with your own heart and attention.

This guide is short and practical—so *you can start right away*.

## WHY METTĀ?

We often try to fix creative problems by changing systems: switching up team structures, routines, or physical spaces. But those things don’t always address what really matters—our state of mind. *Mettā*, or loving-kindness meditation, trains the mind in compassion. It helps us shift from thinking solely about ourselves to feeling more connected to others. This shift opens up real collaboration.

## HOW DO YOU PRACTICE METTĀ?

The change starts with you. It’s simple. Begin by quietly affirming...

- May I be well.*
- May I be happy.*
- May I be peaceful.*
- May I be free.*

Soon you will extend this same loving-kindness to the people around you, and eventually to all beings in the world. When practiced regularly, *mettā* helps teams listen better, share more freely, and create from a place of trust instead of competition.

## HOW DOES IT WORK?

*Mettā* works on three levels.

- The Internal:** It helps you work on fear, ego, and the voice in your head that says “don’t mess up.” This clears space for play, openness, and flow.
- The Relational:** It builds kindness and emotional safety within groups. That safety lets you, and others, share bold ideas and have hard conversations with care.
- The Systemic:** It shifts how we structure collaboration. When we stop trying to *win*, we start building processes that support everyone—equally and with intention. *Mettā is not magic. It’s a mindset you build through repetition.*

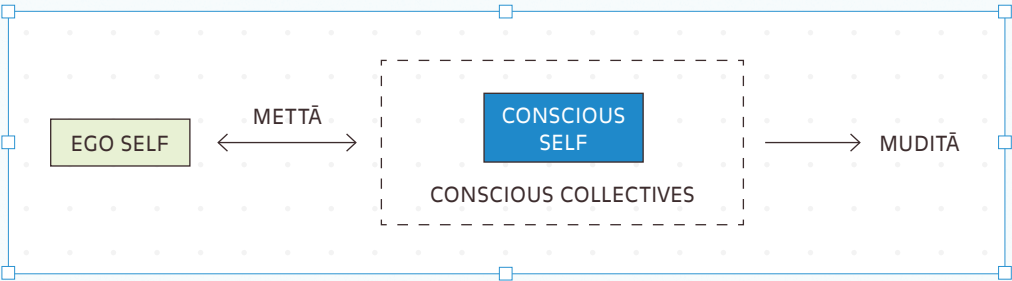
## WHERE DO YOU BEGIN?

You don’t need to change your whole life. Start small.

- Before a group meeting, take 2 minutes to breathe and send *mettā* to the people you’ll work with.
- When you feel annoyed or stuck, pause. Send *mettā* to yourself and to the person you’re struggling with.
- Set a regular time (even 5 minutes a day) to sit, breathe, and practice *mettā*.
- Keep it light. You don’t have to force feelings—just return to the words, again and again.

*One phrase. One breath. One moment of compassion. That’s all you need to begin.*





# EMERGENCE THROUGH CONSCIOUS CREATIVITY

Creativity doesn’t arise from fully-formed individuals bringing polished ideas to the table. Instead, individual functioning itself emerges through relationship. In the C-C framework, the process of creation itself transforms both the individual and the collective as a whole. Each person’s creative potential is nurtured and sharpened through sustained interaction. It’s not about minds coming together to solve problems—it’s through the process of connection that the mind itself evolves.

➤ CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION

The product of *Conscious Creativity* is not novelty, but depth. Through ongoing feedback loops collectives move beyond surface-level collaboration, into something truly emergent. In this state where creative energy builds cumulatively, not competitively. The shift from ego-driven contribution to mutual co-evolution, allows for creative breakthroughs that arise from care, responsiveness, and shared purpose.

➤ MUDITĀ AS CATALYST

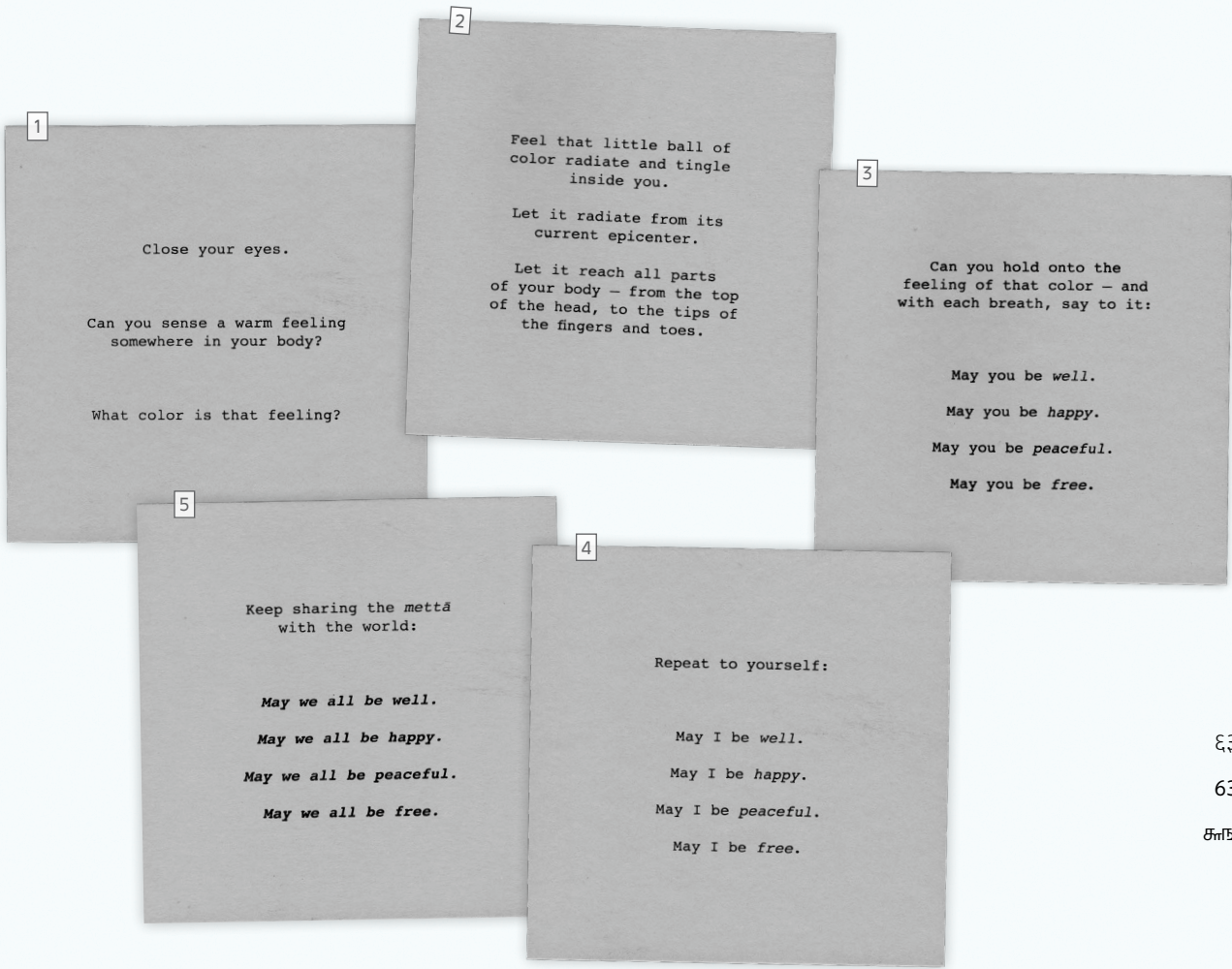
Here, creativity is not just something people *do* together—it’s something they *become* together.

CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION

*Creative transformation affects the collective and individual alike. Each person’s creative potential is shaped and sharpened through interaction as outlined in the principles of **pratītyasamutpāda** (co-dependent origination), **aniccā** (impermanence), and **anattā** (no-self)—all of which point to the idea that nothing, including the self, exists in isolation. Ideas evolve, perspectives shift, and agency becomes amplified. The result is a fluid system of mutual influence where growth occurs collectively. In this emergent model, individual identity is not lost—it’s continually reshaped through connection.*

MUDITĀ AS CATALYST

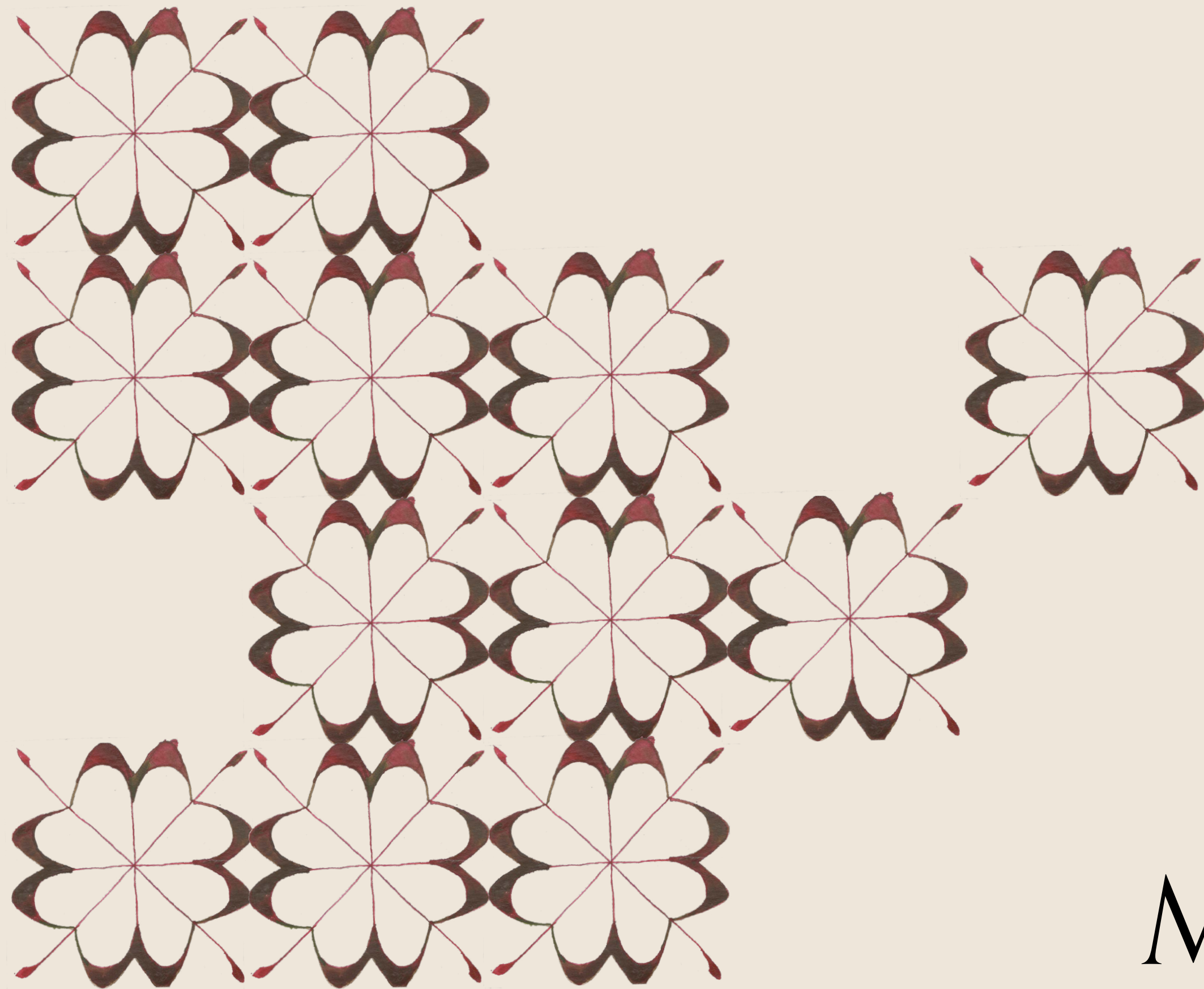
*One of the most profound markers of the success of the C-C framework is the emergence of **muditā**—the joy felt in witnessing others’ success. In most collaborative environments, individual recognition can breed quiet resentment or competition. But in conscious collectives, **muditā** is not a side effect—it’s a catalyst for creativity. This pure form of joy affirms the value of each person’s contribution, creating cycles of trust, encouragement, and bold creative risk-taking. Groups grounded in mutual celebration, rather than ego-protection, generate higher levels of innovation and cohesion. Even when recognition or input is uneven, the collective remains intact—because success is shared, not hoarded. As a result, creative emergence sustains itself.*



The Conscious Creativity framework demonstrates that our creative potential lies not in transcending relationships but in transforming them—showing how individuals, collectives, and environments can co-create innovations that reshape our shared future. In an era defined by unprecedented challenges, from climate change to political upheaval, this framework offers more than just a new approach to creativity—it provides a blueprint for conscious and collective evolution.

However, this raises a crucial question: How might we cultivate these dynamics at scale? As artificial intelligence and global connectivity transform how we work and create, the capacity for genuine human collaboration becomes not just valuable but essential. Might it be that a transformed *consciousness*, rather than just transformed *processes*, are the future of innovation? As a society, are we ready to depend less on new technologies and more on new ways of being in relationship with ourselves, each other, and the creative process itself?





Memory



# Galli Mein Aaya Chor

A walk through  
Mumbai's  
Chor Bazaar

Written and Photographed  
by Viva Motwani  
Designed by Sejal Gupta



In the bustling metropolis of Mumbai lies Mutton Street. A narrow *galli* housing an array of butchers and meat vendors that engage in *mutton* trade. As pedestrians meander into Mutton Street, they are immersed into a hub of a different kind of trade—a street market filled with vintage goods and second hand objects. Visitors are immediately drawn to an eclectic gadget *dukaan*.

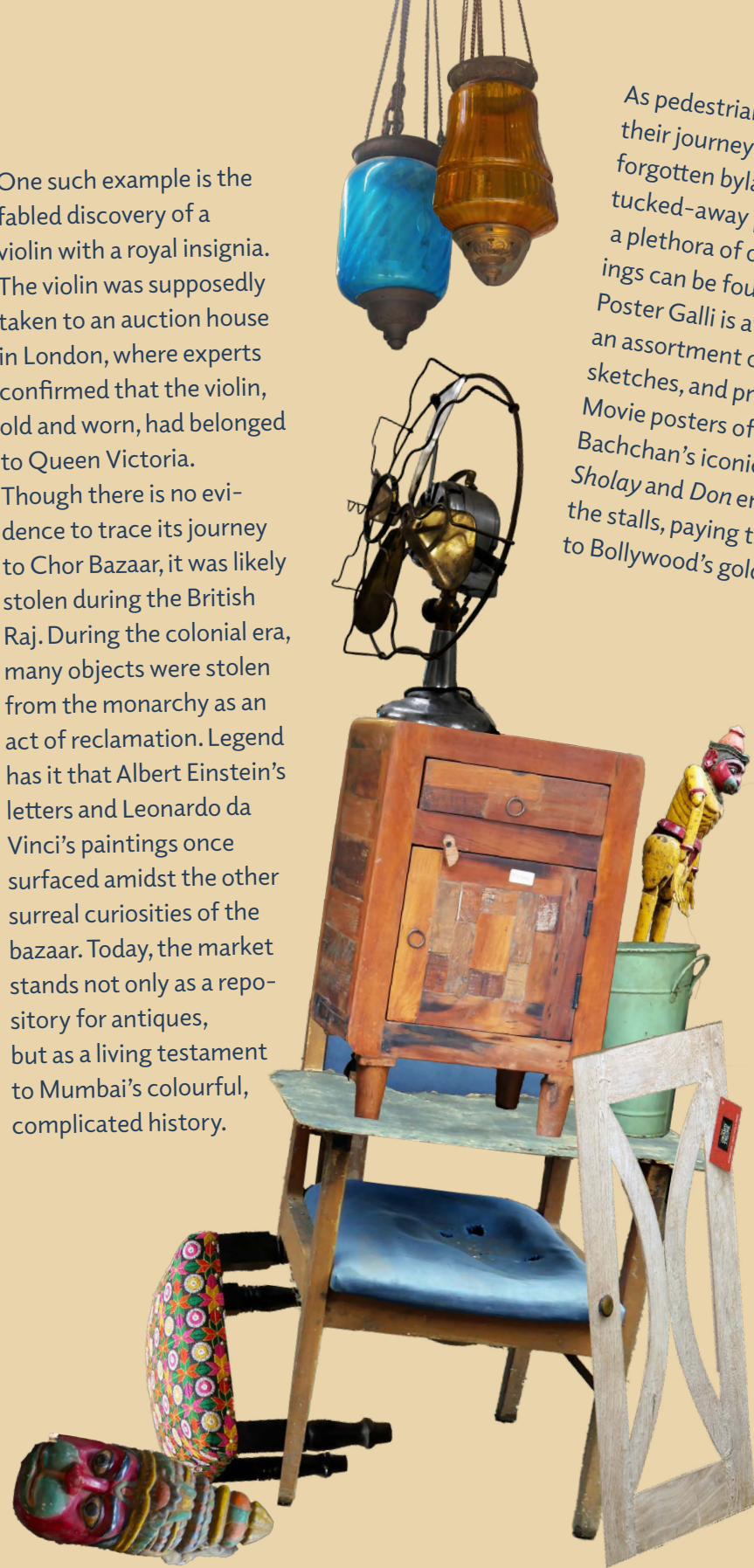
Here, an assemblage of dusty vintage typewriters and old clocks supporting a bright crimson gramophone form a precarious pile. As people duck and dodge and dart through a sea of shoulders through the labyrinthine lanes, they catch brief glimpses of the rare memorabilia and vibrant stalls. The air permeates the clinking of scrap metal, the resinous scent of freshly-carved wood, and the damp and musty aroma of weathered books—a sensory overload that mirrors the disarray of the objects on display. Every corner teems with the cacophony of bargaining voices. Bargaining is a quotidian practice in India's street markets and stalls, where prospective buyers haggle with vendors to negotiate a price that both parties are willing to accept. The rhythmic squabbling of voices and shuffling of footsteps serve as the heartbeat of the market, slightly drowned out by the honking of nearby traffic navigating their way through the crowd.

The auditory qualities of Mumbai's *Chor Bazaar* also lend meaning to its name. At the time of its inception, one hundred and fifty years ago, the street was called *Shor Bazaar*, translating to “noisy marketplace” in Hindi. During this period, India was under colonial rule, with the British establishing control over several territories and disrupting India's socio-political landscape. One such impact was the British mispronunciation of *Shor* which morphed into *Chor*, which means “thief” in Hindi. This became an apt moniker to reflect the market's growing collection of stolen treasures over time.

memory



One such example is the fabled discovery of a violin with a royal insignia. The violin was supposedly taken to an auction house in London, where experts confirmed that the violin, old and worn, had belonged to Queen Victoria. Though there is no evidence to trace its journey to Chor Bazaar, it was likely stolen during the British Raj. During the colonial era, many objects were stolen from the monarchy as an act of reclamation. Legend has it that Albert Einstein's letters and Leonardo da Vinci's paintings once surfaced amidst the other surreal curiosities of the bazaar. Today, the market stands not only as a repository for antiques, but as a living testament to Mumbai's colourful, complicated history.



As pedestrians continue their journey within the forgotten bylanes, through tucked-away passages, a plethora of other paintings can be found. The Poster Galli is awash with an assortment of drawings, sketches, and prints. Movie posters of Amitabh Bachchan's iconic films *Sholay* and *Don* embellish the stalls, paying tribute to Bollywood's golden era.

The galli now holds a hodgepodge of oddities: enamel door knobs, brass tiffin boxes, rare coins, and scattered postcards from faraway lands. A haphazard and higgledy-piggledy display of goods, it adds to the chaotic charm of the market. The cluttered arrangement invites visitors to rummage and explore, with each visit revealing something new, something hidden. The shortage of space in the lane and the abundance of objects compels shop owners to make use of every inch of space. From objects stacked on each other to goods suspended on makeshift storefront signage. The objects themselves rarely polished, and their presentation far from perfect.

Towards the end of the street, beyond a tide of bodies, stands Furniture Galli, where skilled *kaari-gars* carve intricate patterns into materials such as rosewood and teak or sand surfaces to achieve exquisitely rustic finishes. These craftful wonders include antiquated doors, abandoned from old homes and buildings, being preserved in glass and converted into dining tables for sale. Although Chor Bazaar once earned notoriety for its illicit commodities, it has since evolved into a legitimate antique market. Today, shop owners rely on creating reproductions rather than selling discarded relics from the colonial era.



Some stores are dedicated solely to lighting, displaying chandeliers, lamps, and bulbs that glow even in the daylight. Past the illuminated stalls, as pedestrians reach the tapering end of the street, the stark contrast between the market and its surroundings becomes all too evident. Blue construction tarps and the crumbling facades of nearby buildings serve as an unsettling backdrop to this once bustling marketplace.

In response to the burgeoning population of Mumbai, half of Mutton Street has succumbed to redevelopment. Many long-time shop owners have been forced to relocate, their livelihoods uprooted by the pressure of urban growth. Whispers of eventual closure rustle down the street and its hidden branching gallis. The market, once a thriving hub of history, culture, and commerce, now teeters on the brink of extinction. This distinct character, this organic experience of Chor Bazaar, can we preserve it before it simply becomes a part of history?



# Queen Anne, The Mughal Empire, and

Written and Illustrated by Ram Charan  
Designed by Sejal Gupta

Dear Reader,

*The following essay is a collection of thoughts, observations, and hopes for Providence's Conrad Building informed by a variety of academic and non-academic texts.*

*This is not the one true reading of the Conrad Building, but one informed by my own biases and place within our community.*

*The first time I walked past the building addressed as 385 Westminister Street, I barely noticed anything about it. Having just finished note-taking at a meeting, I was desperate to enjoy a slice of margherita from Providence's Coal Fire Pizza.*

*Little did I realize I was passing the Conrad building, setting of the cult classic Complex World (1992), and architectural monument. Its hidden histories are representative of a variety of intersections of political movements, architectural trends, and shifting residents of Providence from the late 1800s through the present day. The year of the building's construction and its stylistic categorization also coincides with RISD's Carr Haus (1885, Queen Anne).*

*Afterward, I had an incredible night with colleagues and walked home shivering from the cold.*

*The second time I walked past the building, the awkward combination of its various aesthetic features was all I could see.*

*The fact that I had missed a tiered, tilting, four-storey tower that wrapped together a dense brick-worked, window-punched eastern facade with a southern wall decorated by a series of more intricate rising multi-storey, bay-windowed towers, in my mind, was now inexcusable. These decorations on the surface were capped with tessellating arches, wrapping neatly between folded extrusions.*

Despite clear appropriations of Persian/Indo-Islamic architectural style, the choice to place the tower against the corner of the building is a distinct trait of the Queen Anne style of architecture, an incredibly prominent style in New England.

Beyond the aesthetically confusing details, the Conrad Building is a compelling case-study in how appropriated style of non-Western architectural form enables systems of exclusion both formally and conceptually. A meticulous re-reading of its various users allows us to recognize the intended and unintended citizens of the Conrad and re-interpret what might represent the future of this and other similar spaces.

The Conrad, and its multiple future Conrads, are the beginnings of a speculative exercise. Within this, labor, as a mechanism of change, serves as the tool through which these imagined futures can be choreographed.

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# the Conrad(s)



# I: Who are the intended citizens of the Conrad Building ?

Beginning in the 1880s, after opening into the 1920s, some of the many tenants and their associated professions included a photography studio, milliners, artist studio, music lessons, drawing schools, dentist offices, fur repair shops, dance studios, and a tea and coffee shop. In an initial assessment of these building program (or varying usages of the building), tenants and businesses of the Conrad Building may seem primarily public-facing. However, in understanding that these businesses were operative during a period of explicit racial segregation in Providence, the Conrad Building can no longer be understood as a house for multiple public amenities. Although it is impossible to prove the exact intentions of the architects, the study of various theorists can help explain some of the biases with which this building was conceived and the corresponding systems of power they seek to uphold.

Charles L. Davies discusses Frank Lloyd Wright's, among others in the movement of organicism, tendency to understand "primitive" or non-Western architectural styles as belonging to a specific way of life. The results of this strong association of non-Western peoples with specific historical practices, an association in service of the hierarchical systems that enable Western empire, is what is termed by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai as "the still lives of Western empire."

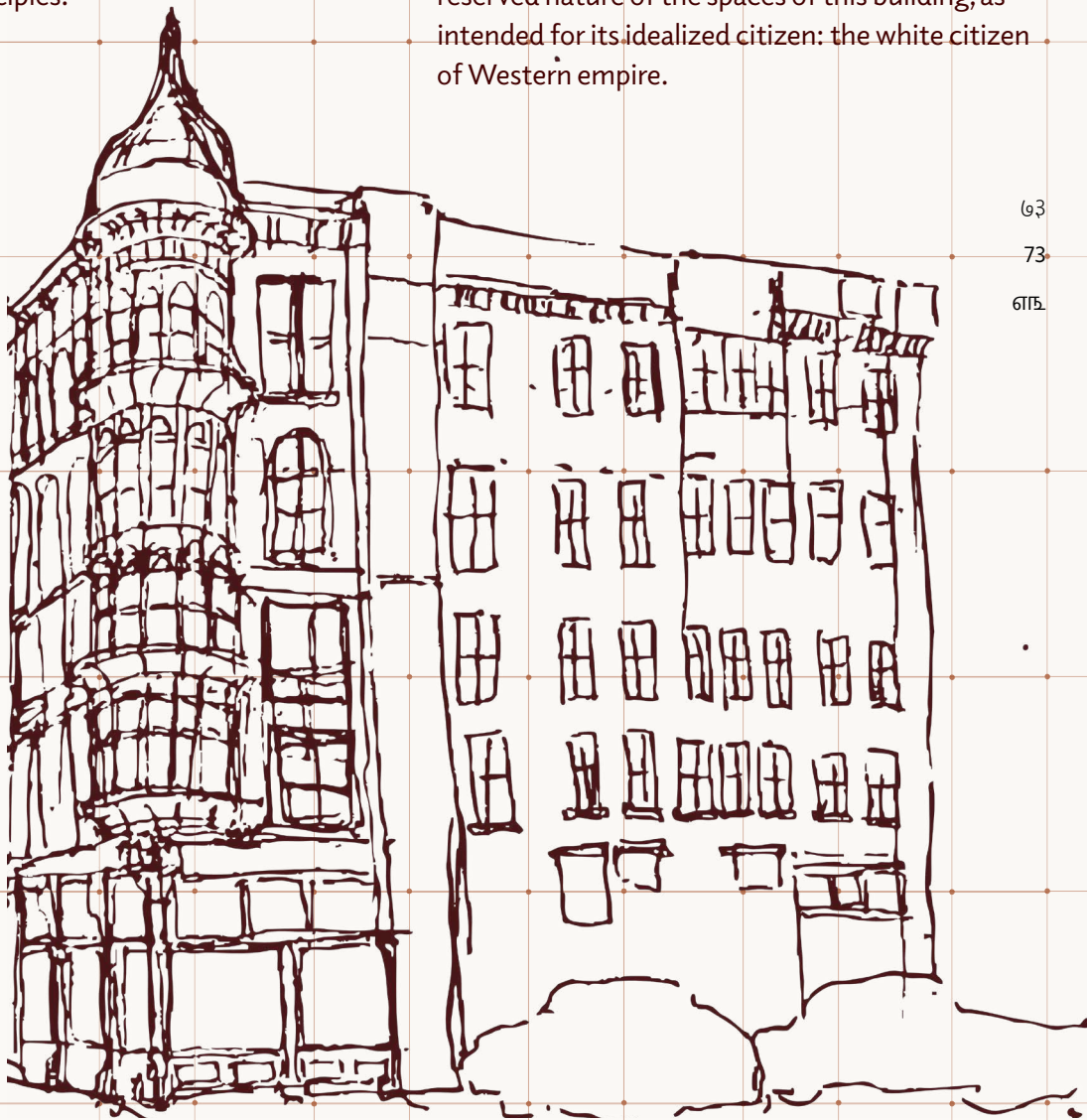
This is further supported by Appadurai's discussions of the use of tokens and typologies to represent complex histories of South Asian Architecture. The central tower of the Conrad, as derived from an incomplete, combined, and "tokenized" understanding of both Persian and Indo-Islamic architectural history, serves as a proxy for the Orient. Instead of a complete form within the context of a building or site within which the style could occur naturally, this tower is transformed into a "sedated, disciplined," and "supine" form of representation made "available for study, entertainment, or scientific curiosity." Equally important in this assertion is the freezing of time which renders non-Western culture as a production of the past.

The tower of the Conrad Building can be inhabited by the Western imagination in such a way that "the globe becomes one and the same, and each is seen as Europe's tomorrow and Europe's elsewhere." Rather than having an appropriated architectural form that acknowledges its cultural heritage, the tower of the Conrad plays as part of a perverse dynamic in which "... 'modern' architecture entailed constructing other building traditions as 'non-modern,' 'vernacular,' or 'primitive' depending on context and proximity." As described by Charles Davies, these styles are recontextualized in their relative meaning to Europe and serve to reinforce qualities of what the West is not.

The Conrad Building participates in constructing both the modern and primitive simultaneously, juxtaposing these stylistically against themselves to arrive at a more articulately defined "modern" form.

As a further level of classification, despite its various non-Western architectural details, the building is still considered to be in the Queen Anne Style: a revivalist form of architecture harkening to a pre-industrial past with explicit religious association. It often features mixing of multiple other styles of architecture into its overall form, allowing for appropriation under the dictation of its guiding principles.

Within the constructed false equivalence between racial character and architectural style, the Conrad building can be reinterpreted as a description of hierarchical systems of Western Empire. In the same way that the organizational principles of the Queen Anne form govern where Indo-Islamic architectural flourishes exist on the building's facade, Western Empire seeks to govern a racially equated non-Western subject. Through this system of equivalences, the Conrad Building seeks to control the non-Western subject while reinforcing systems of exclusion. Despite the public intention of the earlier program, they represent the reserved nature of the spaces of this building, as intended for its idealized citizen: the white citizen of Western empire.



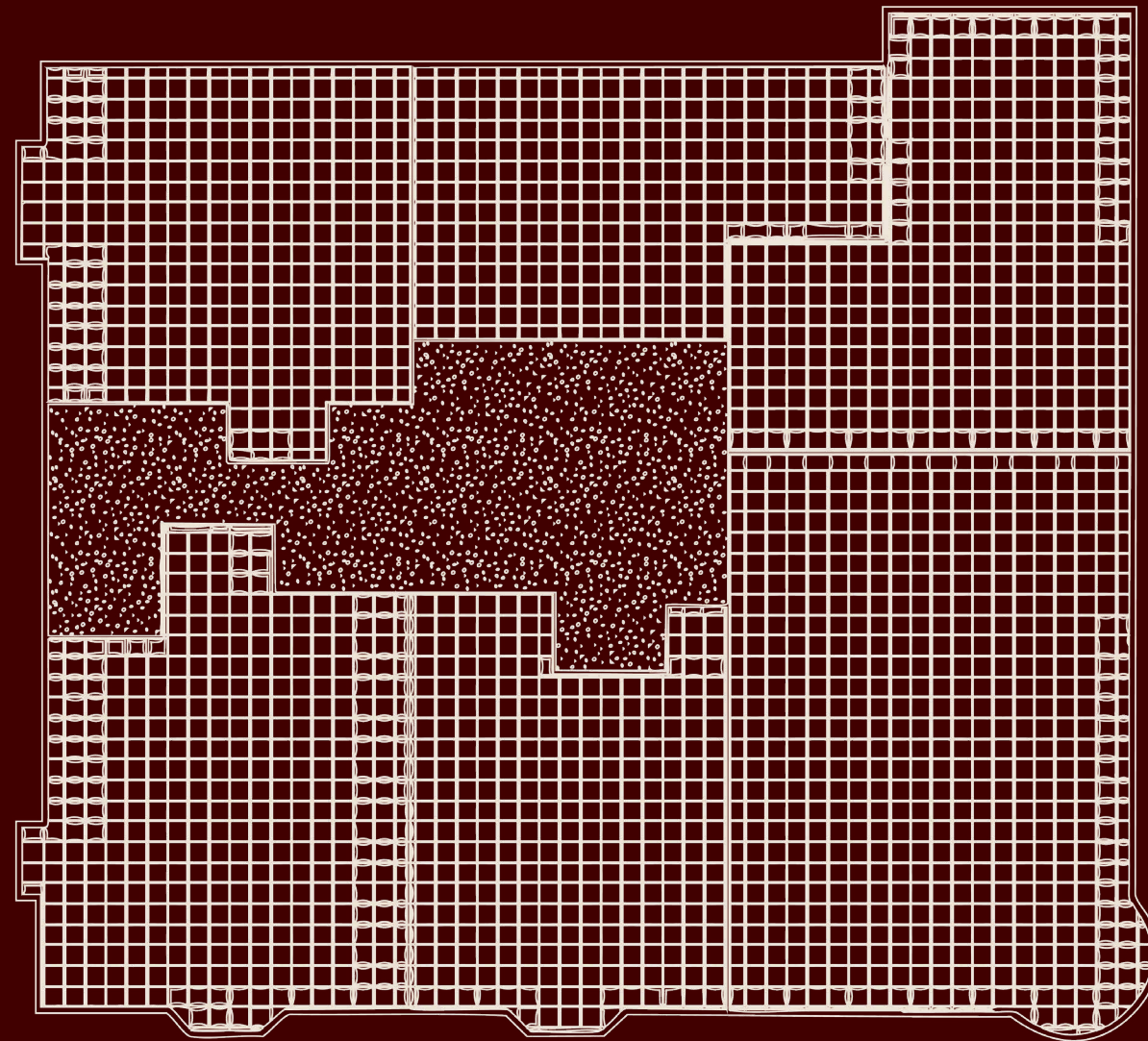


## II: Who are the (un)intended citizens of the Conrad Building ?

Following a range of tenants, from photographers to dressmakers, an incredibly drastic programmatic shift begins in the 1970s. Multiple artists within the local Providence art community squatted within the building and interrupted both intended programs as well as intended inhabitants of the space. Instead of conforming to a predetermined form of program, this informal use of the studio space operated counter to the assumptions that this building exists for an ideal resident.

Around the same time, the opening of Lupo's Heartbreak Hotel in 1975 served as a resuscitation to a slowing downtown. Active student bodies of both RISD and Brown paraded to the club housed in the Conrad where various famous musical acts including Bo Diddley (as part of an artist residency over the course of a week) and James Brown performed on stage.

Lupo's also hosted and facilitated performances of famous punk musical acts including the Ramones and the Talking Heads (3 of 4 founding members attended RISD). It would be impossible to fit a full discussion of the complexity in defining the punk movement. However, in the same way that punk confronts the music industry for its complicity in the capitalist system, punk also confronts the contentious histories of the spaces it is performed within. It serves to interrupt the intended use of these spaces, providing disruptive potential in "imagining new ways of being."



Rather than understanding the building style and the punk movement as completely antithetical to one another, the performance and use of the space by various artists in the 1970s serves as a confrontation of what these prescribed forms of space were before. It serves as an interruption of various colonial logics that govern the building's external appearance and as a provocation, performance and the punk ethos serve to challenge our assumptions of how the Conrad Building should be used.

In 1978, the Conrad building was sold to H & S Realty Co. Inc, a real estate company that eventually renovated the building into a set of condominiums in light of failed building inspections. The transformation of the building into a set of condominiums feels sympathetic to the ultra-racialized style and exclusive terms with which it was conceived: an institutional enforcement of who is the exclusive citizen of the Conrad.

Architect and scholar Esra Ackan discusses the qualities of internal and external borders within citizenship and how further restrictions within a territory might be placed to bar participation of imagined noncitizens. Within the context of the Conrad Building, its conversion into a condominium barred many members from using the space as they had during the 1970s. Following a lengthy period of renovation, many condominium units failed to sell, leading to shifting tenants and uses, including dorm housing for Johnson and Wales in the 90s and currently present restaurants and bars like Providence Coal-Fire Pizza and Barnaby's Bar.



### III: Who choreographed and designed the Conrad of the past ?

The disruptive potential of shifting programs such as Lupo's Heartbreak Hotel and informal residents of the 1970s might serve as an inspiration for modern-day change. Through an understanding of carpentry unions of the 1800s and associated forms of labor, we can project how systems of labor can help to enable change within a seemingly static building.

In its original construction, all of the arched windows, nestled within the rounded form of the tower, were prefabricated off site by the Builders Iron Foundry. Other interior work was detailed by carpentry practice French Mackenzie & Co. while the masonry practice of N.B Horton helped to adorn the stonework of the exterior facade. All stand as examples of specialized practices of construction.

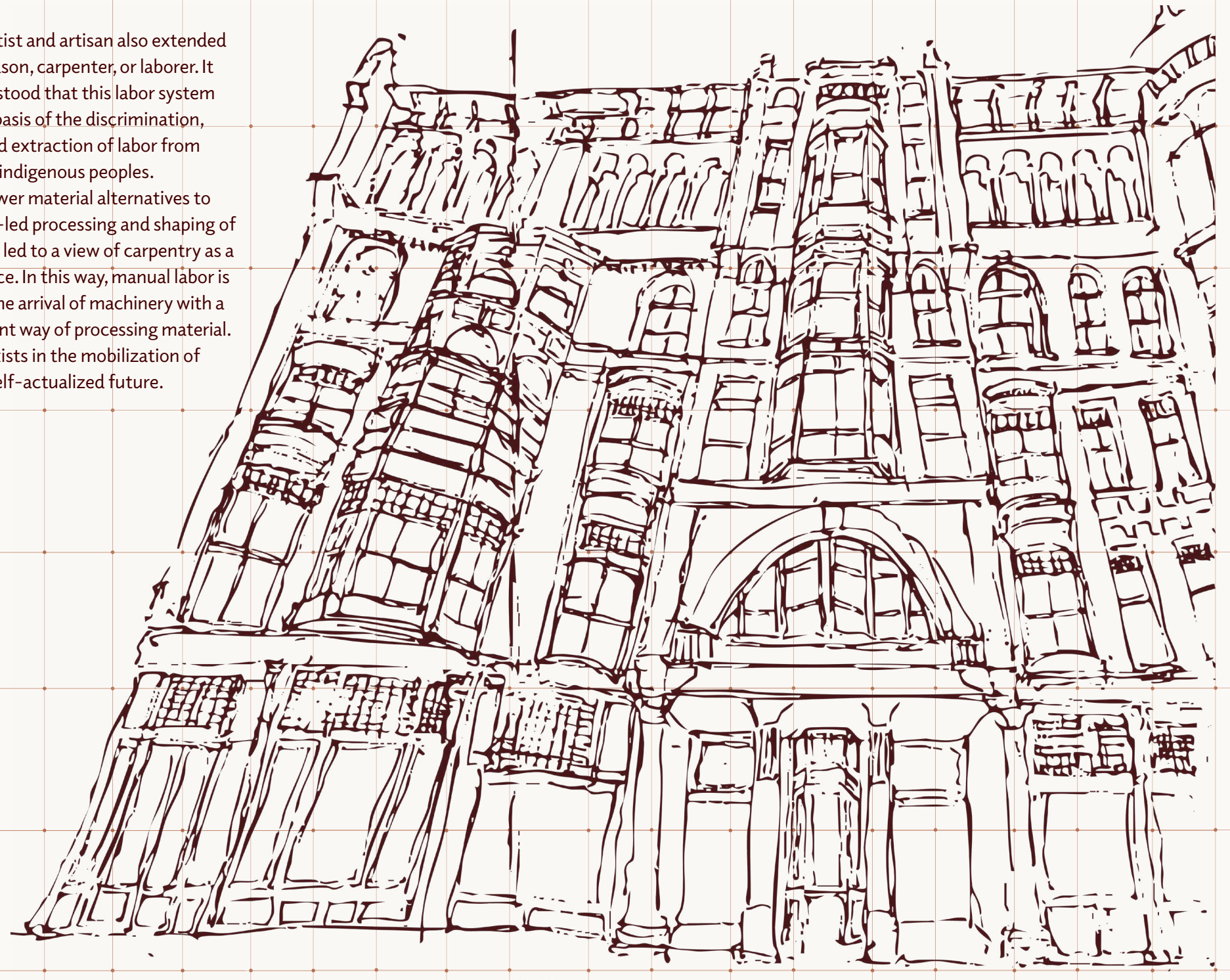
This period of initial construction coincides with a series of labor strikes orchestrated by Massachusetts Carpenters of the 1880s. These coordinated strikes (for the reduction of a ten hour work day to eight hours) were indicative of a growing disconnect between the "Masters" and "Merchants" of the carpentry practices and their employees (indentured servants and enslaved peoples). According to professor and architectural practitioner Peggy Deamer, "labor as a concept" emerged during the 1400s at the same time as developing tension between artists and artisans. As the artist and artisan were separated for the purposes of serving an industrialized system, decolonial historian Fernando Lara posits colonialism allowed architects the unilateral freedom to reconstruct and design through abstraction.

The rift between artist and artisan also extended to architect and mason, carpenter, or laborer. It must also be understood that this labor system functioned on the basis of the discrimination, marginalization, and extraction of labor from primarily black and indigenous peoples.

At the time, newer material alternatives to wood and machine-led processing and shaping of wood through mills led to a view of carpentry as a less efficient practice. In this way, manual labor is devalued through the arrival of machinery with a greatly more efficient way of processing material. Radical potential exists in the mobilization of laborers toward a self-actualized future.

Drawing from the existing development of various co-op organizations in light of the labor movements of the 1880s, perhaps a similar movement of change can redefine the Conrad Building.

To imagine new forms of change in the Conrad Building, there possibly can be a reimagination of the professions of architecture and laborers who might work together to enable this change.







## IV: Who can design the Conrad(s) of the future ?

Using the 1970s as a guide to disruptive forms of program and the history of union movements associated, a future variation of the Conrad Building can support similarly inclined forms of use.

A stage as an elevated platform for citizens/noncitizens alike can function to elevate the voice of passersby. Drawing on principles of Russian constructivism, the stage can interrupt the pre-conceived notion of right to expression by providing space for performance and speech.

Similarly, an investigation of informal residences and coliving spaces devoted to artist communities serve as an interruption of what it means to belong within the building. The navigation of these complex histories of restrictive program, and terminologies with which the building was conceived, is not unique to the Conrad building.

This case study serves as an example of one way into understanding a building's history and a possible future imagined to counter the exclusionary terms of its proposed audience. Beyond the Conrad's original terms lies opportunity for change not only in terms of a more publicly accessible program but also a reconsideration of architectural practice. A future Conrad provides the opportunity for a more intimate relationship between agents of change and the constructed reality they envision.

*On my next walk past the Conrad building,  
I'll duck beneath the iron tower once more for a  
warm slice of margherita, and I'll do my best  
to remember the complex histories that intersect  
underneath the tower-sewn facades. I hope  
to continue pondering the many possible futures  
of shared space within this construction. In the  
course of speaking to you, I hope you can as well.*

*To further imagination,  
Ram Charan*



# Belief / Broken Numbers

*Photographed and Written by Anant Saraf  
Designed by Jyot Kaur Thind*

The following tale originates from the examination of home, religion, technology, and the South Asian belief that these are all closely connected—and sacred. The following tale is told through images of Kolkata.

*a young man's  
relationship to*

The dissonance between dream, memory, and reality in an increasingly digitized world is presented here as an interlude.

*and that which unites  
and separates them*

Here, noise in images is interpreted through the lens of techno-animism. If God is omnipresent, everything is interconnected and technology cannot be separated from the human experience, could it be that noisy images show us phantoms that we cannot yet explain?

*is 'organic', a result of  
high ISO (a camera's  
sensitivity to light)  
or increasing  
exposure in post*

Here, 'broken numbers' is used to describe not only photographic noise, but also all information produced by computation that is considered useless, erroneous, or random and discarded.

*photographic noise is  
the interpolation of infor-  
mation from something  
we cannot record—the  
qualities of what can be  
seen and not recorded.*

*memory*

And so,  
he was  
home.  
This  
place was  
intimately  
familiar  
to him.  
Yet, when  
he closed  
his eyes,  
all he  
saw was  
his life in  
the other  
world







He defined his world in images,  
slowly discovering that his home  
could never be defined.  
Like saints without religion,  
numbers divided by zero,  
and Gods that always failed...

→ Peter Cat Recording Co.,  
“Love Demons”

Divided by belief and united by noise,  
his worlds morphed  
into one another.  
That which he left to fulfill his dreams,  
seemed to have  
That which he left to fulfill his dreams,  
seemed to have

become a dream.

become a memory.



At first, it seemed that  
no God could convince  
him of his existence  
in this world or his  
reflection in the next.

Nani...



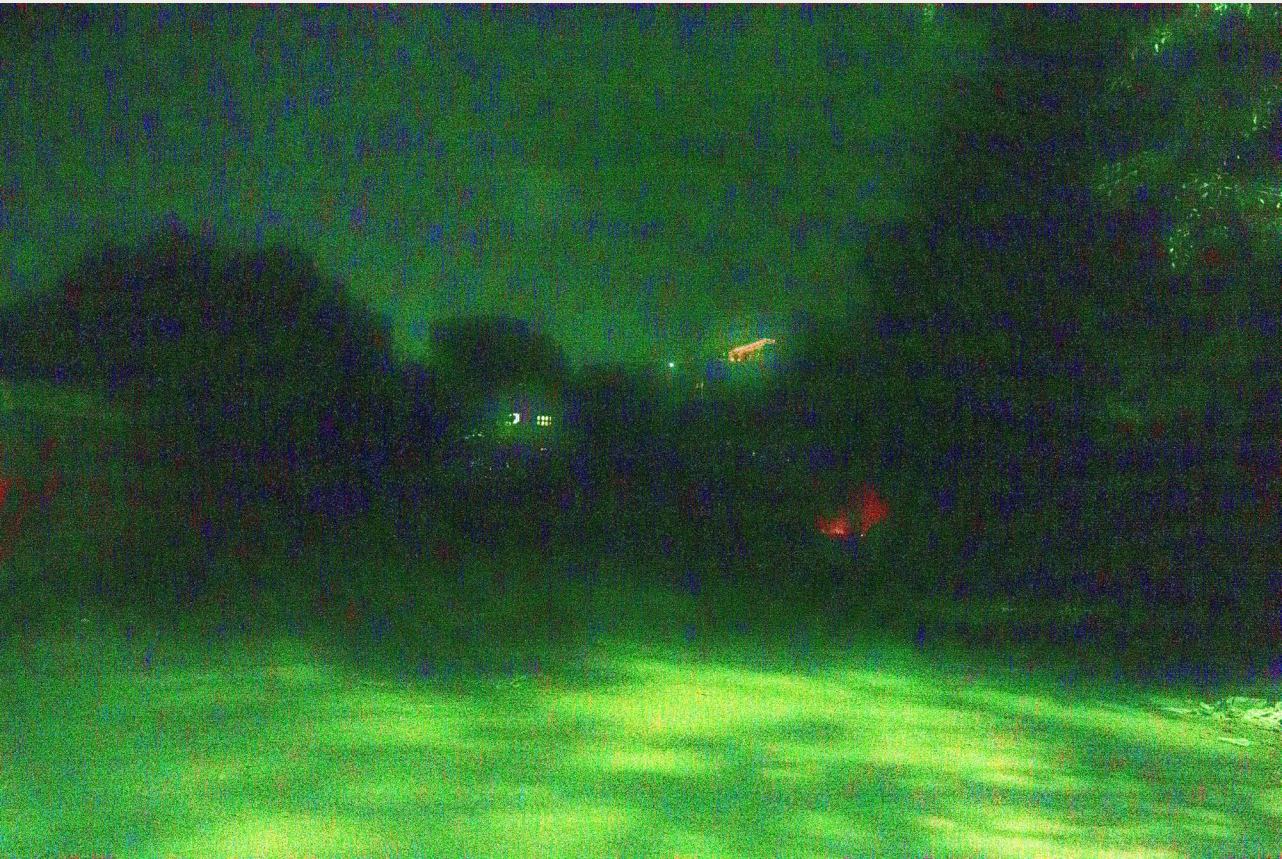
*If a photograph records past light, capturing something real, and if a painting's  
abstraction allows it to better reflect the blurriness of memory, can a noisy photograph  
be a bridge between the two?*



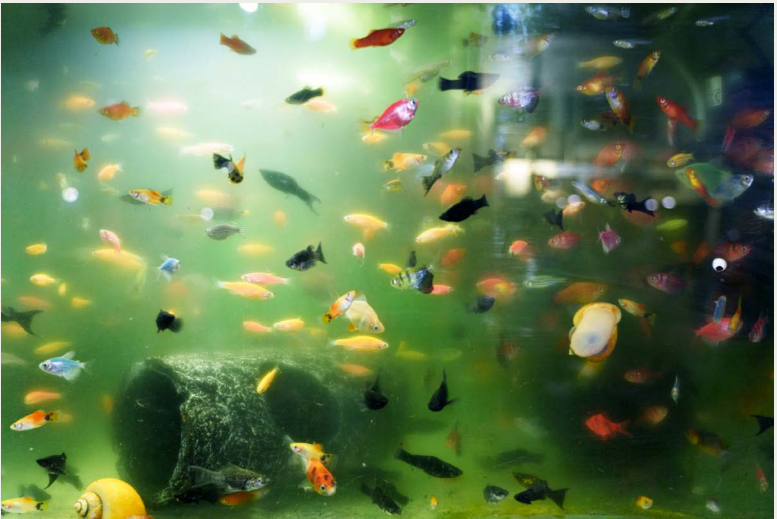
In his two hundred and fifty seventh walk,  
he noticed an intangibility—an otherworldliness  
unacknowledged.

He could not explain it.

Technology helped him make  
sense of the world. Yet, when it confronted this            intangibility,



it made                            broken                            numbers.



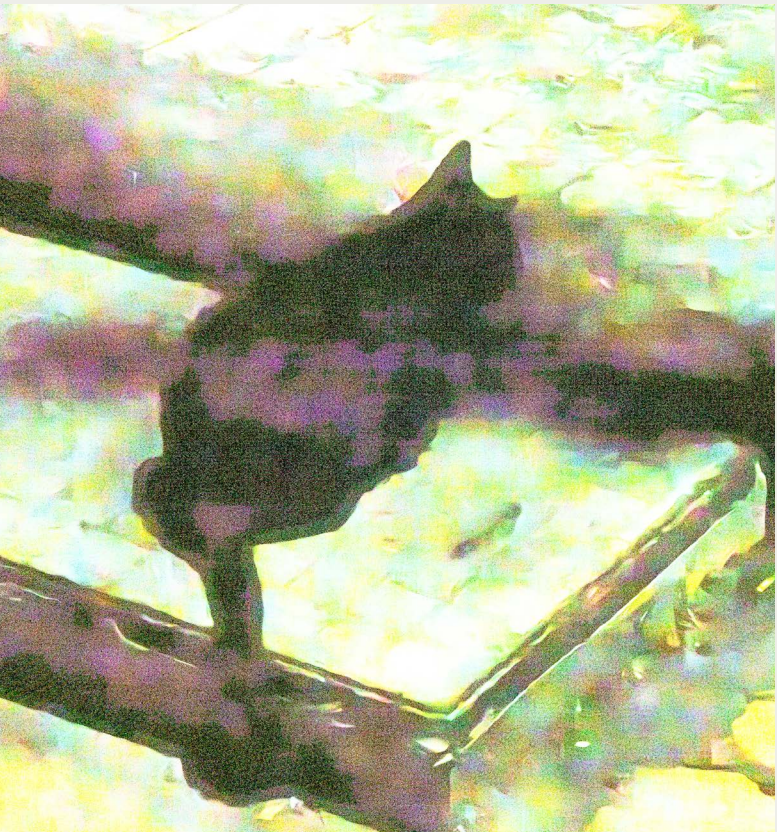
*Fish at Chetla*

Every living thing seemed to know  
what he did not...

That in this world, anything worth  
protecting was

protected by God,

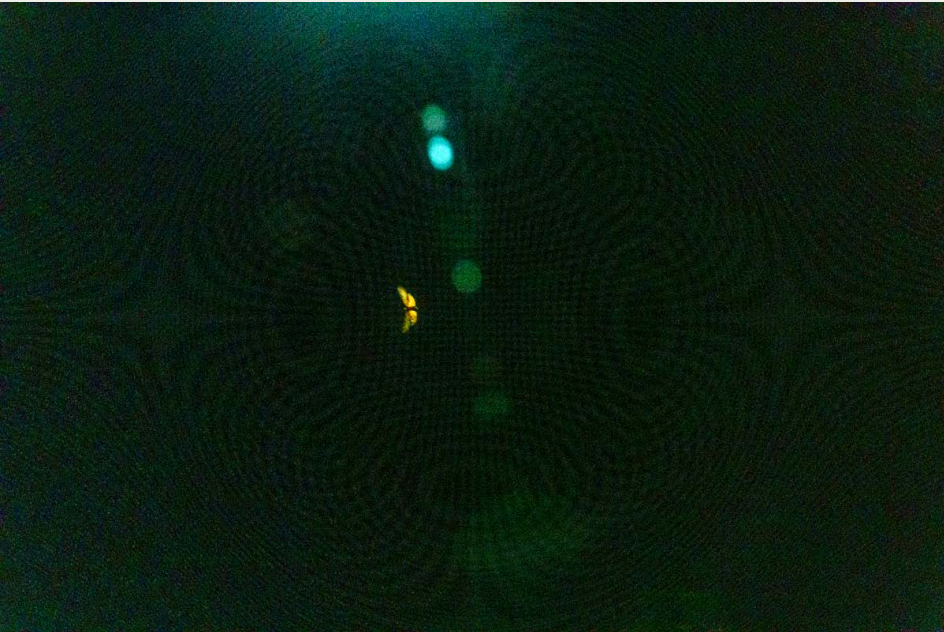
assigned by a human.  
And in Kolkata,



*Cat on Ashoka Road*

what was not worth protecting?





The moth against the light,  
the light against the sky,  
noise as the vessel.



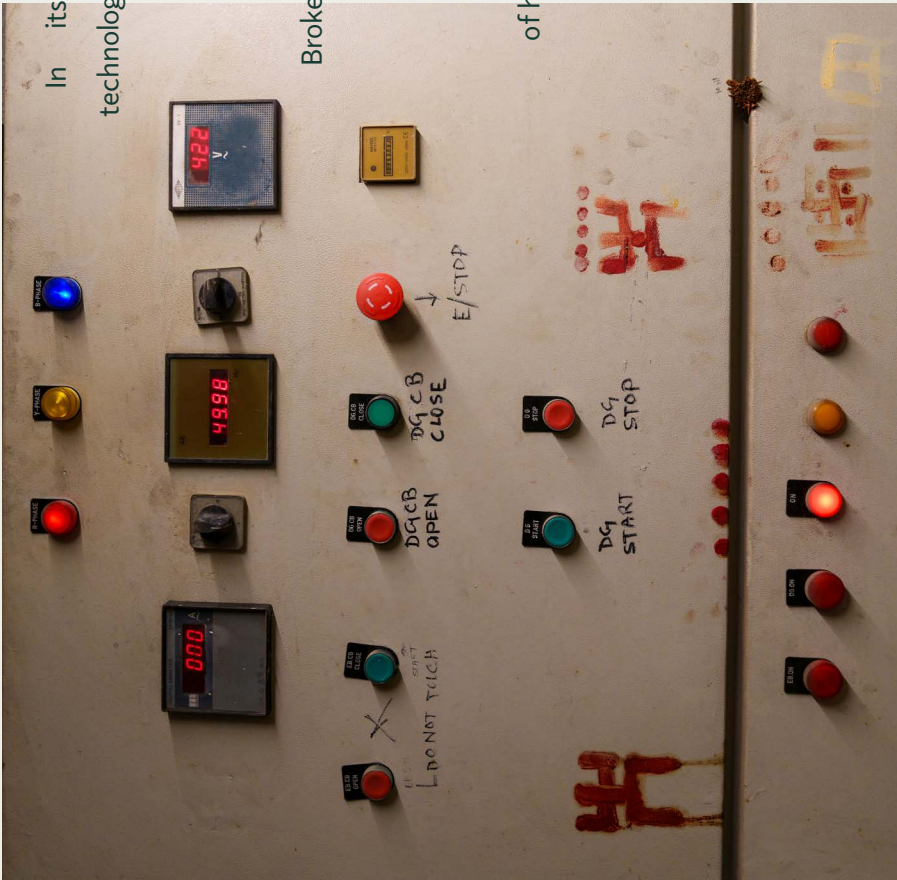
A Great Bailey Bridge  
Banyan Tree

It seemed that  
only noise  
and  
broken numbers

could describe what he  
felt—

what was, but could  
not be seen.

What if the un-  
seeable was still  
worth protecting?



In its failure,  
technology led him to a truth.  
Broken numbers began to explain the  
strangeness  
of his recent life,  
that which was beyond reason.



In the next,  
he awoke.

He could not grasp the



significance of his home,

its sacralization of all  
that was around him.

It did not make sense,  
at first.

He did not believe

what seemed to be  
all his life.

At some  
point,



human invention  
left him  
with

broken numbers to  
define his world.

At no point was this world  
any less sacred,  
any less beautiful,  
any less worth protecting.



# Glossary

<i>Ayigalu</i> A sacred casket worn around the neck	<i>Ghungru</i> Clapper	<i>Masala</i> As a suffix, “masala” typically indicates a dish or ingredient flavored with a blend of spices used in South Asian cooking, or a dish itself that is prepared with such a spice blend	<i>Pallu</i> Border of a fabric
<i>Bagh</i> Garden	<i>Gwalas</i> Cow-herders		<i>Paratha</i> A layered, usually whole wheat flatbread from South Asia, made with ghee or oil, and often stuffed with lentils, potatoes, or other vegetables
<i>Bhiksha Patra</i> Wooden bowls used by Jain monks for food	<i>Janamaz</i> A small, sacred rug used by Muslims during sajdah	<i>Matha Patti</i> A traditional South Asian head ornament, typically crafted from strands of precious metal, pearls or rare stones	<i>Pashmina</i> Goat’s wool
<i>Chor Bazaar</i> Thieves’ marketplace	<i>Jangama lingam</i> A portable symbol of Shiva	<i>Meenakari</i> Enamelling	<i>Qibla</i> The direction of Mecca
<i>Chutney</i> A condiment generally made with fruits or vegetables, mixed with spices, herbs, and other seasonings	<i>Jinn</i> In Maldivian folklore, supernatural beings of smoke and fire who live between worlds	<i>Mihrab</i> A niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the qibla, the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca, towards which Muslims should face when praying	<i>Sajdah</i> Prostration
<i>Daan</i> Donate	<i>Kaarigars</i> Craftsmen		<i>Shikharas</i> Spires in a Hindu temple
<i>Dharma</i> Duty, righteousness	<i>Kani</i> Double interlocking twill tapestry weave	<i>Mutton</i> Goat meat	<i>Shivdhara</i> Cord around which a ayigalu is worn
<i>Fanditha</i> Supernatural spirits in Maldivian folklore	<i>Kharadis</i> Woodworkers	<i>Naan</i> A soft, leavened flatbread	<i>Shor Bazaar</i> Noisy marketplace
<i>Fanditha Veriyaa</i> Practitioners of fanditha	<i>Kona Dukan</i> Corner Shop	<i>Nani</i> Maternal grandmother	<i>Sindoor dibbi</i> Sindoor box
<i>Filigree</i> Gold lattice	<i>Kundan</i> Pure gold stone-setting		<i>Sindoor</i> A vermilion powder
<i>Galli</i> Narrow street	<i>Lung ta</i> Literally, “Wind Horse”, refers to Buddhist flags in the Himalayas	<i>Om</i> A sacred sound and symbol representing the primordial hum of the universe	<i>Sozni</i> Silk or wool embroidery
<i>Galli mein aaya chor</i> There’s a thief in the streets	<i>Mantra</i> A word or sound repeated to aid concentration in meditation	<i>Pakora</i> A fried fritter, usually made with vegetables in a gram flour batter	<i>Stambha</i> Pillar
<i>Ghanti</i> Ritual bell			<i>Vishwaas</i> Belief
			<i>Visuddhimagga</i> A compilation of Buddhist teachings and traditions

End Notes



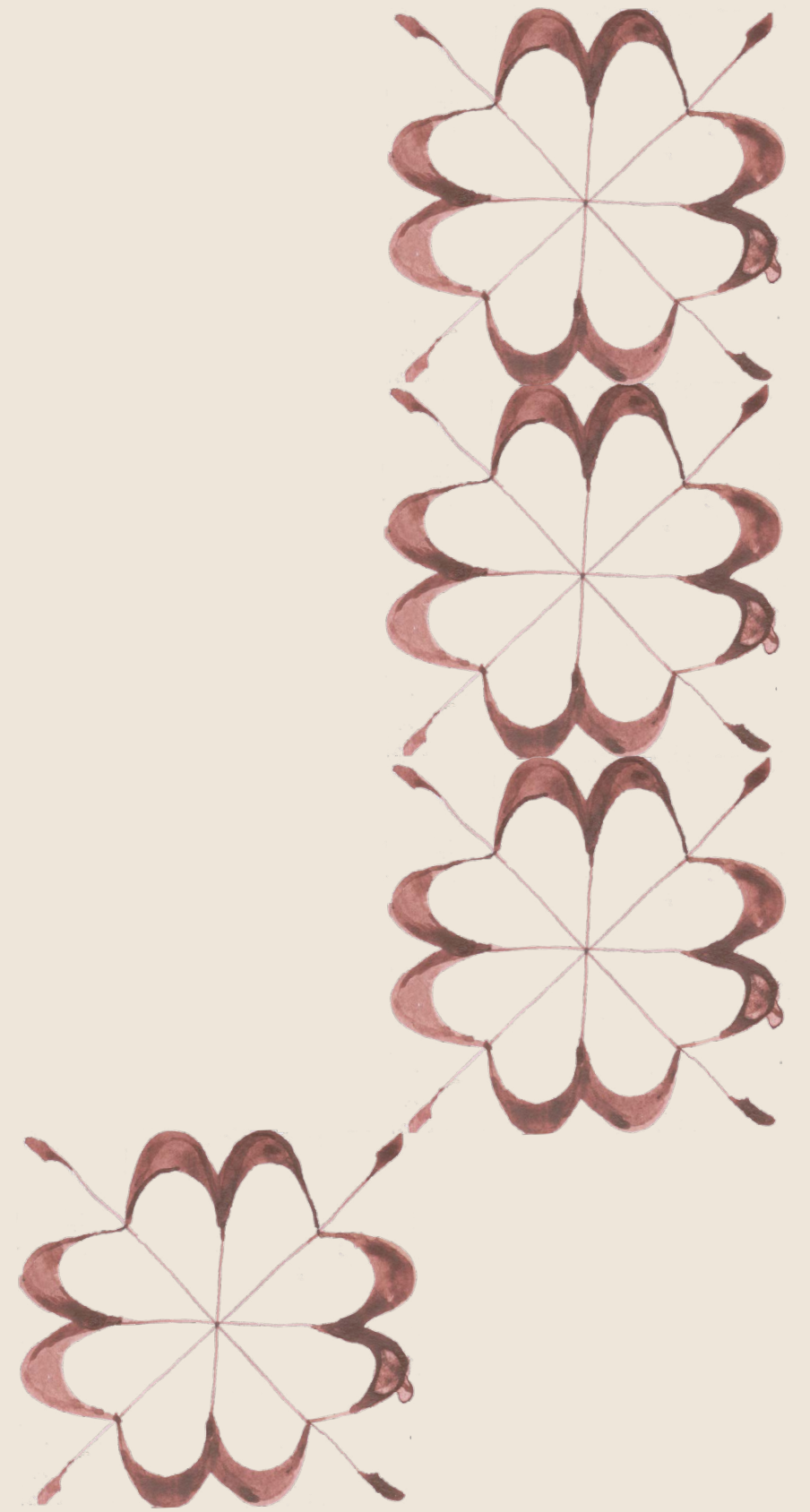




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